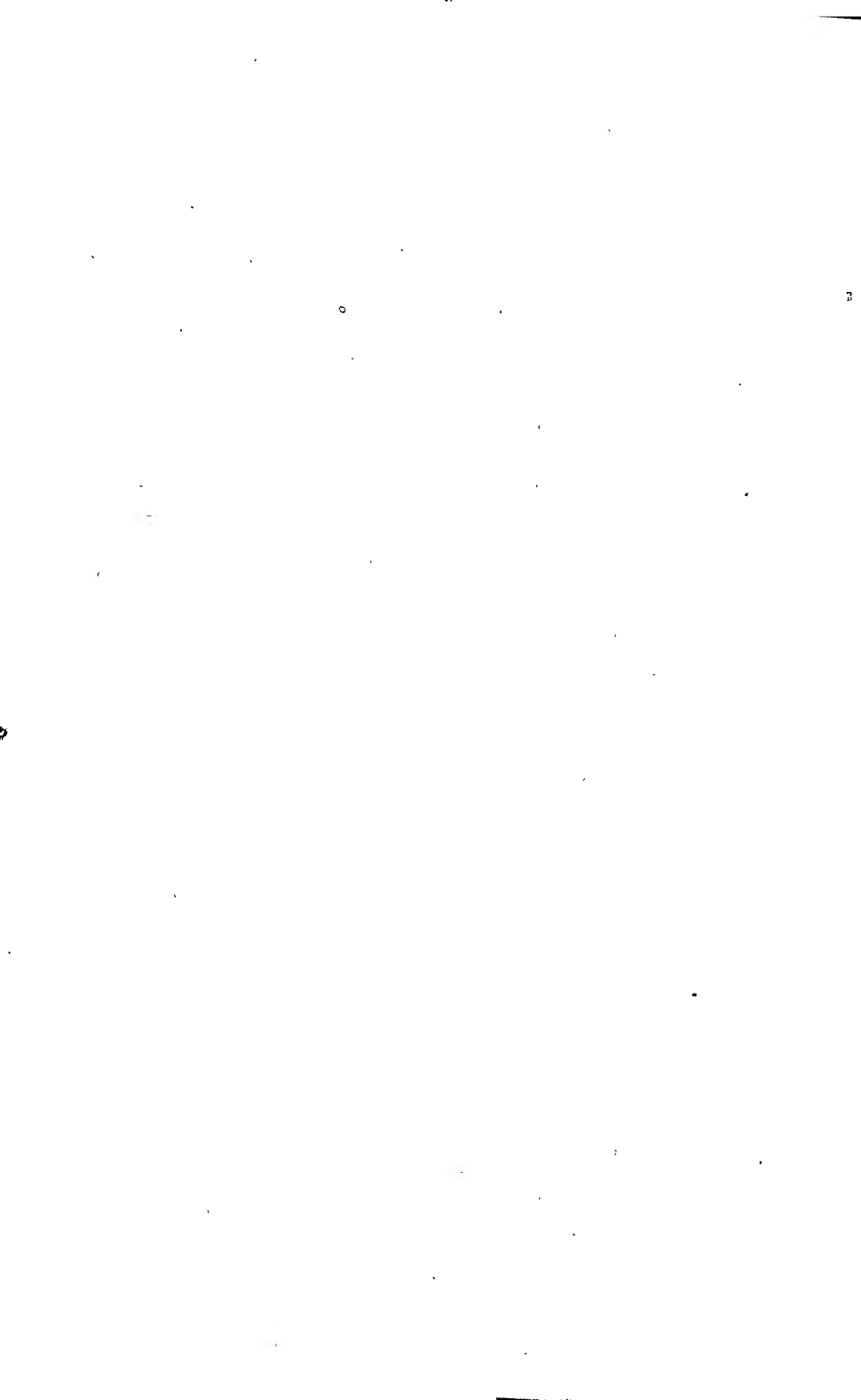




HOME IS THE STRANGER



HOME IS THE STRANGER

by Edward A. McCourt

TORONTO
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
OF CANADA LIMITED

1950

PS 8525
C 6 H 6

44214

Copyright, Canada, 1950

By

EDWARD A. McCOURT

All rights reserved—no part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in a magazine or newspaper.

Printed in Canada.

FOR
MARGARET



CONTENTS

	PAGE
<i>Chapter 1</i> - - - - -	1
<i>Chapter 2</i> - - - - -	16
<i>Chapter 3</i> - - - - -	33
<i>Chapter 4</i> - - - - -	52
<i>Chapter 5</i> - - - - -	71
<i>Chapter 6</i> - - - - -	94
<i>Chapter 7</i> - - - - -	105
<i>Chapter 8</i> - - - - -	113
<i>Chapter 9</i> - - - - -	127
<i>Chapter 10</i> - - - - -	143
<i>Chapter 11</i> - - - - -	162
<i>Chapter 12</i> - - - - -	178
<i>Chapter 13</i> - - - - -	195
<i>Chapter 14</i> - - - - -	206
<i>Chapter 15</i> - - - - -	220
<i>Chapter 16</i> - - - - -	230
<i>Chapter 17</i> - - - - -	241
<i>Chapter 18</i> - - - - -	248
<i>Chapter 19</i> - - - - -	259



HOME IS THE STRANGER



CHAPTER 1

WOULD THINGS EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN? SHE WONDERED, lying on her back in the green grass that was soft as moss under her bare legs and looking up into a translucent sky across which small clouds drifted like fat sheep seen far off, body, head and limbs merged into a single indeterminate blob of whiteness against a background of watery blue. Was there some alchemy in the heart or blood or nerve-cells, or whatever one felt with, wrought subtly through the act of loving, some quickening of the spirit which time might modify and diminish but never quite suppress? She did not know, and wondering sat up and brushed back her hair with an impatient thrust of slim brown hand. Nor did she know why she laughed, only that the emotion inside her must find expression somehow and laughter seemed the easiest way because it committed her to nothing at all.

The man lying beside her on the grass was startled into anxious attention. He reached up and took her hand in his. "Am I so funny, Norah?"

She did not answer at once. Because, looking at him, feeling the grip of his hand upon hers, she was caught up again in the strange ecstasy of the experience which they had shared so wholly as to cease to be individual entities, and whose termination was endurable only because in her ignorance she believed it to be capable of repetition so long as life endured. He sat up and she leaned her body against his so that her head rested on his shoulder.

"Am I so funny, Norah?" he repeated. But he did not wait for her answer. He kissed her, and his kiss had the curious tentativeness of one who was still a novice in love. In some things she was instinctively wiser than he; her response was swift and compelling. But as he drew her close to him a shadow flashed across the hill-side,

blotting out for an infinitesimal moment what she saw in his face. In a minute or less the low-flying squadron of planes had passed over the city and out to sea. But the shadow they had cast in a flicker of time seemed, in a way uncomprehended and unacknowledged, to linger on the hill-side, killing on the instant the impulse which had drawn man and girl together. He still held her close to him, but as he might have held a child.

"It will be a long time, Jim," she said. "Years. Centuries."

He did not contradict her. "You'd better marry me, Norah. We could be together oftener then."

She nodded without speaking. Feeling the way she did there seemed to be nothing to talk about. But she knew that he expected an answer. "Perhaps it would be better," she said after a while. "If you're sure you don't mind."

Now it was his turn to startle her with his laughter. He threw back his head and laughed until there were tears in his eyes. "Norah, dearest, I'm proposing to you!"

"And I'm saying yes, Jim. I'm taking you for better or worse. For richer or poorer. Only I won't say the rest of it for not even death will part us."

"It will be for poorer, I'm afraid. No Armstrong ever made any money. And I'm true to type." Deliberately he said nothing of death, choosing to dismiss, while he had the power, his familiar of many days.

"No difference," she said. "No difference at all. I'll go with you in my bare feet to the ends of the earth."

"It won't be quite as bad as that," he said smiling. "I figure we'll always have the price of a pair of shoes. And we won't be going quite to the ends of the earth. But a long way. You'll be lonely sometimes, I'm afraid."

"Not lonely," she said with conviction. "Not with you." He waved his hand towards the city below, and the sea, dark blue and shadow-patched beyond. "You'll miss all this."

She did not look the way he was pointing. She looked instead at the gorse which was yellow along the slopes of Cave Hill. Then she closed her eyes and saw beyond the crest of the farthest summit the glens of Antrim in autumn when the colour lay thick on the

hill-sides and the water ran clear over rocks and white sand; and there was a sudden pull at her throat.

"People aren't everything," he added.

Afterwards, thinking about his words, she was surprised that she had not contradicted them. She looked at him for a long time without saying anything at all. He was staring straight ahead at the horizon and she was able to study his profile the way she liked to, when he did not know that she was looking at him. It was a strong face, she thought, what her mother would have called 'good', implying, though she would not have put it so, a degree of gentleness which modified and in a way softened the strength so that you could never be afraid of it. "I like it," he said, without bothering to point. "The sea is like the prairie. Never the same for a minute. That's because the light shifts. And you can see a long way. I like eye-space."

"Space-crazy," Norah said. "All Westerners are space-crazy. You hate trees and hills because they spoil the view."

He laughed and turning quickly kissed her on the mouth. "Guess you're right, Norah. All the fellows back home enlisted in the Air Force or the Navy. People think it's a joke the way prairie boys rush to be sea-dogs. But it makes sense really. The sea and the prairie aren't so different. There's lots of room on both."

She looked out to sea and wondered what it would be like if it were land, land stretching undisturbed, unbroken to an horizon so remote from the infinitesimal speck of being which was oneself as to be wholly beyond the limits of communication. The hills that had always been around her, no matter how high, were close and companionable. Each was an entity, complete with name and features and personality. "Are there no hills at all where we'll be going?" she said.

"No hills. But you won't want them after a while."

He spoke with conviction. But she could not believe him and because she could not believe was suddenly afraid. I'm like a child, she thought. I've ventured as far as the garden gate and the fields beyond look awfully big. And she slipped inside the circle of his arms for no other reason than that she was afraid.

He was sensitive to her fear but misunderstood its origin.

"Things will be all right, Norah," he said. "The war can't last more than another six months. And my leg will keep me on the ground for at least three."

"Funny thing," he went on after a while—and she was wise enough in the ways of his vocabulary to know that what he was going to say might range all the way from hilarious comedy to black tragedy—"funny thing. Until a month ago I could hardly wait to get back in the air. I cursed the doctors and I hated myself. Now I wouldn't mind at all if I never got back."

He broke off abruptly, embarrassed by words which were no less than a breach of faith. Stammeringly he tried to make atonement for the heresy he had spoken. "I don't mean that exactly," he said. "Just that . . . that . . ."

She laid her cheek against his. "You love me? That's it, isn't it?"

He kissed her gently. "That's it, Norah."

"And it all dates from the time you whistled at me on the street corner. And when I turned around to squelch you, you looked so nice I changed my mind. But I'm sorry I've come between you and your airplane."

"You looked funny all right," he said. "The rain was dripping through a hole in your umbrella and your hair was plastered down one cheek. But you were cute. And you didn't look mad when you turned round. Not too willing either."

"I wasn't—just judicial. Not that I ever encouraged pick-ups."

Why was it that when she tried to put their first meeting into words she could not tell it in the fine singing phrases it deserved, but only in the cheap chatter of the cinema? Why couldn't she tell him how she had really felt the first time she had seen his face—half-ashamed, half-hopeful—in the dim melancholy light of a rainy winter afternoon, when it seemed as if nothing could ever lift the weight of gloom which had settled upon her spirit? Why couldn't she make him feel the way the dimness and the melancholy were gone on the instant, the way she knew with unshakeable assurance that she was going to fall in love with him? But the words that sprang to her lips were thin brittle clichés which had no connection at all with the unique emotion prompting them.

"When will we tell your dad?"

She was quiet then, thinking of what she would say to her father. Not that he ever seemed to notice her very much, lost as he was in his dreams of restoring the greatness of his forebears.

"We Brandons, my dear," he had told her a hundred times, usually enunciating his words with great precision lest she should see that he was drunk, "we Brandons were a great name in Ulster in the days of the O'Neil. Your Uncle James has all that is left of the land—ten acres of ten thousand—the rest stolen from us by whoremongers and idolaters and sorcerers and liars whom the everlasting fire consumeth. And not a stream to be fished on the ten or a covert to be flushed. But business will flourish some day, my dear, some day. We'll rebuild Brandon Hall, you and I. A pity the male line is all but extinct. Your Uncle James can't last much longer—and I'll be the last of the Brandons. But you'll make a good marriage, my dear. And Brandon Hall shall be your dowry." And he would putter off, mumbling now to himself, to pore over the form charts and football pool sheets, which, correctly interpreted—and surely he must find the key some day?—would restore the tarnished glories of his ancestral home.

But although he seemed so often unaware of her existence he would miss her, for she knew his little ways better than Aunt Lucy, and was always willing to humour him for the sake of peace. Aunt Lucy would not be pleased when she heard the news. Aunt Lucy did not like colonials. Their manners, while not always actually bad, were undisciplined; their attitude towards the Mother Country insufficiently respectful. Worst of all, they had no feeling about the independence of Ulster. And so few of them had families. Jim Armstrong, Aunt Lucy acknowledged, was no doubt a superior type of colonist, but he knew nothing of his forebears. "They say my great-grandfather on my mother's side came from Scotland," he had told her. "He was a farmer, I guess, like Burns. Only he didn't write poetry." But it wouldn't have mattered to Aunt Lucy if Jim's great-grandfather *had* written poetry. Poetry had been a genteel accomplishment once, in King Charles' day and even as late as the Regency; but it wasn't any longer. Nowadays poets were queer people who wrote verses as odd and undisciplined as the lives they led.

Norah pitied Aunt Lucy and was afraid of her. You could laugh at her, perhaps, but always uncertainly, living as she did in an old stone mausoleum in a shabby suburb because there had been Brandons in it since Waterloo. "Captain Anstruther Brandon of the Royal Inniskillings," Aunt Lucy would hasten to say to visitors—who came hardly at all—pointing to the portrait which held place of honour in the dim shabby hall. "He bought the house for his bride and fell two years later at Waterloo. She died soon after. She was a niece of Richard Brinsley Sheridan." You could feel sorry for Aunt Lucy, living in a monumental shell she couldn't keep up, where ghosts of dead warriors and forgotten beauties left no traces in the dust, living in the recesses of a memory that had no meaning in the present. But always Norah was a little afraid too, because in spirit Aunt Lucy was already with the dead. She clung to the earth for no other reason than that it held the dust of those she loved.

Perhaps, Norah thought, her father could tell Aunt Lucy. He at least would be pleased, if only for a little while, until he knew that she was going away for good and leaving him to endure alone Aunt Lucy's shadowy dominance. "My son-in-law," he would say, jerking the words out as if impatient to be rid of them. "Thousands of acres in the New World. He's chosen good blood, sir, in which to found his house. None purer than the Brandon strain. None older." And thinking how her father would talk she said, "Tell me, Jim, what is it like, really?"

But she did not listen to what he told her. It was pleasant to lie in the shelter of his arms and to let her memory wander back over the days spent—so long ago it seemed—on the little farm where Uncle James lived, the ten acres which her father said was all that was left of the Brandon estate. She wondered now if there had ever been a Brandon estate. But she would not try to find out because she liked to dream of the thousands of tumbled acres lying between loch and mountain as something real, and the dream did no harm to anyone. "From the upstairs windows," Jim said, "you can see thirty miles." But at Innishcoolín you couldn't see two or three miles, for the hills stood up all around—green hills softly moulded except for Ben More which broke out at the very summit in a formation of jagged rock that all the people knew had been the throne of ancient

kings. Between the hills to the west you caught glimpses of the blue waters of the loch; and on good days she had loved to follow on her bicycle one of the twisty little-used paths beyond the bog until she ran, always unexpectedly, into a reedy inlet of the tortuous loch. But even at the water's edge itself there was no seeing more than a mile or two, for the loch wound in and out among the hills and there were islands dotted everywhere on its blue surface, coming between you and whatever lay on the other side. The islands, she knew, were most of them haunted; but once an old man who was a friend of Uncle James rowed her across to an island half a mile from shore where he had poteen hidden (so all the neighbours said) and she had not been afraid. There was a mouldering, lichen-covered ruin on the island, a few grey chipped stones heaped in an untidy pile that the tourist books said had once been a Celtic chapel. But the old man, knowing better, had spoken familiarly of the races of antiquity, the Tuatha De Danaan and the Firbolg; of the Formorians who were gloomy giants of the sea and had come all the way from Egypt bringing the stone of Jacob with them, the same stone that the English stole from the Irish who founded Scotland, and put under the coronation chair in Westminster Abbey. "But there's no blood in a stone," the old man had said. "And there's no virtue to be had sittin' on one. They won't be purifyin' their black souls that way." And she remembered how, hearing at night a strange wailing noise in the grove outside Uncle James' house, she had buried her head in the feather tick and lain awake for an hour, hot and trembling, wondering whose death had been foretold in the cry of the banshee. And indeed the very next day her great-aunt from Castleblaney, who was also a guest in Uncle James' house, had been taken of a stroke and was dead three months later.

"And some day," Jim said, "we'll have irrigation. Then the drought will be licked for good. Maybe we won't have to wait very long either. I hear they're going to build a dam on the south branch of the river right after the war. We'll grow enough wheat in the West to feed the whole world and have enough left over for the hogs."

There had been pigs on the farm at Innishcoolinn. She had liked them at first when they were little and white, but as they grew up she lost interest. Once, helping Uncle James to corner a half-grown

porker which had escaped from the pen, she had been knocked flat on her back in the mud when the pig ran between her legs. Uncle James had bellowed with laughter and afterwards taken her to the little shop at the cross-roads a mile down the lane and bought her toffee. She remembered the day more clearly than almost any other of the days she had spent at Innishcoolín, for after buying her the toffee Uncle James had gone into the public-house adjoining the shop and come out speechless and incapable of driving his horse. So Norah, who was only eight at the time and had never had reins in her hand before, drove all the way home. She was frightened, but the horse was twenty-four years old and never went any faster than a very slow walk. Uncle James lay in the bottom of the cart groaning at intervals, but half-way home he had recovered his speech and told her a long story of the time when, returning late from a wake, he had found his way barred by the little folk crossing the road in front of him in endless procession, so that at last he had been compelled to lie down in the ditch until they had tired of their mischief. Norah looked up at Jim, and the smile in her eyes was almost serious.

"Are there little folk in the West?"

He was puzzled. "Little folk? You mean kids? Lots of them. Best country in the world for raising a family. How many will we have?"

"Seven, I think. All boys. But I don't mean children. I mean the wee folk. You know—leprachauns—banshees."

He shook his head. "Not one. Trouble is there's no place for them to hide."

"And no gods?"

"No gods, Norah."

He would never call her Nonie, the diminutive of her name current in her family. "Norah is a lovely name," he had said the day they met. "Why spoil it?" She knew that he was right. There was music in her name the way he spoke it. "Will you miss them very much?" he asked.

"Not so long as I have you," she said. But she could not help wondering. No glens for the little folk, no mountain summits for the gods. Only the loneliness of unbroken space, of mile upon mile of field and road and field drawing away from the centre in an ever-

widening circle to an horizon distant beyond reckoning. "And besides," she added quickly, "I've read a lot about the West. And I've seen it in the cinema. I know what it's like."

He laughed indulgently. "I hope you don't believe what you've read. The pioneer days are gone, Norah. Except away up north, nearly a thousand miles from where we'll be going. We're civilized now."

"Civilized?"

"Sure. Good roads everywhere—cars, telephones, the city only a hundred miles away. There's been an awful lot of sentimental rubbish written about women eating their hearts out on the bald-headed prairie and nursing a stunted geranium or a stalk of rhubarb or something so as to keep a little beauty in the drabness of their lives. But that's all nonsense—now, anyway."

"And people?" Norah said. "Our neighbours?"

His hesitation was barely perceptible. "You'll like them," he said. "Only . . ."

She waited a moment before prompting him. "Only what, Jim?"

"Funny thing about the West," he said. "When I was a kid you could stand on our front step at night and count twelve lights. Now you can see two."

She did not understand. "Maybe they go to bed earlier," she said, and laughed at her foolish fancy.

"They've moved off the farm, a lot of people," Jim said, almost brusquely. "Into the towns."

"Absentee landlords," Norah said, mindful of her country's history.

"Something like that. Commuters, I call them."

His voice changed tone. "But there are still some folks living on the land. You'll probably make more friends over there in a month than you'd make anywhere else in a lifetime. Western hospitality isn't a myth—it's real."

The defensive note in his voice stirred her to quick sympathy. "Dear Jim," she said, "please don't. You know I'll love the West, because it's you. The Sahara Desert or the Vale of Kashmir—the glens of Antrim or the Canadian prairies—it makes no difference, so long as you're there."

"People aren't everything," he repeated.

"You are," she said.

The city lay below them, half-veiled in heavy smoke. There were ships in the harbour, freighters and transports mostly, with grey destroyers lurking outside in the sound; and far beyond, near the line of the horizon, thin wraiths of smoke curled up and lost themselves in the sky. The smoke-wisps marked fleetingly the progress of ships at sea, in their camouflage no longer distinguishable to the naked eye, ships ploughing through waters full of menace, outward bound. The hum of the city rose incessantly and without variation; but its very persistence dulled its effect, so that on the upper slopes of the hill it seemed no more obvious or significant than the unending drone of bees in the clumps of yellow gorse. The man and girl were isolated, for the moment as remote from the world of their kind as if they were the only inhabitants of some far-off desert island; drawn together in the sharing of an emotion which, however much the rational mind might deny it, they knew to be unique in the experience of the race.

"I know that other girls have felt the way I do," Norah said. "Only, I don't believe it."

"The house isn't much," Jim said. The words were not as irrelevant as they sounded. She knew that he did not want to speak just now about the things he felt most strongly. Emotion terrified him. But she was not deceived.

"It has walls and a roof," she said. "What more do we need?"

"New shingles for one thing—the roof leaks. And a lot of paint. After Mother died and Dad moved to the Coast the place got run down. Times were tough in the thirties. And with a renter you can't expect things to be kept up so well."

"You want to get back very much, don't you?"

"More than ever now that you're going with me."

"You see, Norah—" and he wrinkled his forehead the way he always did when much in earnest— "I've got some ideas since I've been over here. I used to think that what you call tradition was just so much hooey. But maybe Aunt Lucy is right. Maybe there is something in this business of family."

"You mean you're going to apply for a coat of arms?"

He grinned self-consciously. "Not right away. I guess I don't make myself clear. I don't mean that because some people have lived in the same place for five hundred years they have a right to feel superior to the latest homesteader. It doesn't make them any better socially. But I figure it's good for them. I mean that if you take roots in a place, if your sons and your sons' sons carry on in the same place, well, after a while you've got something that's quite apart from the crops and the hogs. Something that counts in a way they don't. Something to be proud of—or pleased about, anyway—that isn't tangible. Something to hold and pass on."

"Father Abraham," Norah said, and watched, with emotions almost maternal, the red creep into his cheeks.

"Guess I've a sentimental streak in me all right," he said apologetically. "But it's good sense too. Men shouldn't be drifters. And you can't get the feel of a place unless there have been others there before you, of your own blood . . ."

He broke off in stumbling embarrassment. "I know," Norah said. "Here we take that sort of thing for granted. There have been Brandons at Innishcoolín for centuries, I think. When I go there I'm not a stranger. And that's not because I've lived for a while with Uncle James. Any of us would be at home at Innishcoolín even if we'd never seen it before. Our blood's in the earth there."

"That's it," he said. "That's it—your blood's in the earth. And the way I figure it, it's time we put some of our blood in the West. So far about all we've done is take something out. It's time we stabilized things."

"Time to take roots?"

"That's one way of putting it, I guess. There's been one generation of Armstrongs on the farm out there. We'll be the second. And we'll build a house to last; not a mansion, but a big house just the same. Not frame but brick or cement or maybe native stone—only I guess we'd have to be our own stone-masons. And when we're old one of our seven sons will carry on."

"And he'll have seven sons too. And the eldest of them will take over when his time comes. Our grandson. We'll be very old then."

"The house of Armstrong," Jim said. "And maybe, if we stay long enough, the gods will come."

"They like stability," Norah agreed. "Something they can count on. They can't always be moving about."

Behind them the sun had dropped below the range of hills far away to the west. The sky darkened quickly; in half an hour it would be night. "Time to go home," Jim said.

But he made no move; nor did Norah. Aunt Lucy, she knew, would be fluttered, nervous. Already she would be sitting in the dimmed-out great empty drawing-room, looking past a corner of the drawn blind down the long street where the trams ran, wondering if she should put on her hat and shabby old black coat, which were new when the century was young, and walk across the street to the corner chemist's where there was a telephone she might use. She had done so once or twice before, but only under extreme provocation after hit-and-run daylight raids. Not that she was afraid to go out, even after dark when there were no lights anywhere and dear knows what kind of people prowled the streets, their faces a faint whiteness in the shadow. But calling the office meant admission of her niece's status, admission that Norah was a person who worked. Brought face to face with the fact Aunt Lucy did not equivocate; she did not seek refuge in the sophistry that Norah typed to aid the war effort. She acknowledged the bitter truth that her niece—unlike any other woman of the Brandons—worked in order to live. It was better than starving, perhaps, but more vulgar. So that, except in moments of crisis, Aunt Lucy chose not to think of Norah as having bodily existence between the hours of eight-thirty and six.

It was good not to have to go back at once to the great lonely house, stripped bare of all but the meanest of necessities, sprawling bleak and comfortless in its unkempt half-acre of ground, where the soldiers came at night with their girls and made love in the shrubbery and not even Aunt Lucy dared to protest. If the bombers struck again in force and the house survived it would not be empty much longer. Some homeless wretches were sure to be billeted in the musty upstairs rooms, long uninhabited except by rats and spiders, dank and mildewed and stale with the smells of age and neglect. Norah wondered if Aunt Lucy might not in her heart be praying for the destruction of the house before strangers should profane its sanctity and mock its nakedness.

Night came down. There were no stars, for the fat fleecy clouds that had drifted across the afternoon sky had darkened and swelled like sponges dipped in water. They had lost their individual entities and now lay like a thick moist canopy over the city. No lights showed below the canopy; only a faint luminosity emanating from the thousands of houses and factories huddled close together as if for protection in the great horseshoe of level land between sea and hill, and reflected back upon itself by the cloud-bank overhead.

"No bombers tonight," Jim said. There was assurance in his voice, the assurance which came of experience.

"They haven't been over for nearly two weeks," Norah said. "Maybe they've decided the Irish aren't worth bothering about any more."

It was then that they heard the siren. Its banshee wail rose high and shrill and seemed to strike like a knife-edge on the brain itself, a sound conceived in nightmare, remote from any experience in life. The man and girl lay close together in the illusory shelter of the bracken and her heart beat strongly against his chest.

"Scared?" he said, for no other reason than his awareness that she needed the reassurance of a human voice. But her answer, if indeed she spoke, was lost in the confused rattle of anti-aircraft fire and, from somewhere across the sound, miles away, the dull crump of exploding bombs.

The raid was short. But when they sat up and looked out over the city, fires were blazing at a hundred points and the canopy of cloud was stained red to its uttermost limits. From somewhere near the centre of the city a dense column of smoke rose straight and high in the air until, just below the cloud-bank, it mushroomed out to envelop a score of lesser columns that rose from widely separated points on both sides of the sound.

"It's over now," he said. "We'd better go."

She obeyed wordlessly. She did not want to go. Even an hour snatched from the torment awaiting them below was precious. But she could not contend against the urgency in him, and drawing her jacket close about her shoulders she followed him down the twisting path, trying to keep his body between herself and the red lights in the city below. "A bad raid," he said, speaking loudly so that he did

not need to turn his head. "They just unloaded blind and went home."

The tram-lines were silent and dead. They walked for hours, stopping once for an eternity to help a smoke-grimed rescue crew pull a woman and her child from a ruined building. The woman was dead, and the child slowly screamed its life away while a volunteer nurse administered useless first-aid. They detoured for seemingly endless miles to avoid the shattered centre of the city, sitting down often on the curb to rest and smoke. The man accepted the scene almost constantly before their eyes with fatalistic indifference—the long rows of brick tenement-houses silhouetted against the shifting background of flame-tinted smoke and cloud, the occasional gaps of hideous significance where the dust of shattered brick and mortar mingled with the smoke to half-obscure helmeted figures bearing away the crippled and the dying and the dead. He had seen it all before, on a scale which rendered this night's chaos insignificant. All the time Norah clung to his arm, and her eyes were the eyes of a terror-stricken child. Once, when he stopped to help a rescue crew in their futile work she turned away and cried hysterically.

But when at last, in a drab hour of rain-soaked dawn they came, past crumpled tram-tracks and blasted houses where little groups of people stood in apathetic attitudes betokening mental shock past conscious feeling, to the smouldering ruins of the old stone house in the suburbs, she made no sound. The rescue crews were busy elsewhere. She knew that they had not looked for her father or Aunt Lucy.

"A direct hit," Jim said. "Not a chance."

He led her away. She stumbled along beside him, a nightmare-haunted child, lost in a street where all familiar things had vanished behind a monstrous backdrop of smoke and flame through which puppets swarmed aimlessly, driven by obscure and nameless terrors. "We'll be married as soon as I can fix things," he said. "But it'll be a few days. Is there any place I can take you? Any relatives?"

"I want to go with you."

Her face was expressionless, but she spoke with an intensity which startled him. "But Norah, I've got a six-by-six cupboard over a pub!"

"I want to go with you," she repeated stonily. "I don't care where . . . so long as you can make love to me . . . the way you did yesterday. . . ."

He looked at her, faintly shocked. But the emotion passed. The act of love would this time be without sensuality. For Norah it meant life in the midst of death, the security of the flesh when the spirit had failed.

"All right, Norah," he said. "I won't leave you."

CHAPTER 2

THE LAND LAY NAKED BENEATH THE HOT SUN. ITS SURFACE, bare of native tree or shrub, unbroken by any irregularity of contour to distract the eye of the casual observer, stretched into distances so remote as to fade gradually beyond the range of sight. But there was variety in the wide bands of colour which fell in a simply wrought pattern across the flatness of the land; a pattern which blended the blackness of mile-long stretches of freshly tilled field, the soft green of the new-born grain, the brighter green of grass by fences and roadsides, into a subtle harmony suggestive of deliberate intention rather than happy accident. The sky which arched over the land in a dome of unrealizable depth and amplitude escaped monotony less through contrast than the almost imperceptible shadings into one another of infinite variations of one basic colour. The blue, hard and intense at the highest point of the dome, softened and lightened through innumerable gradations down to the rim; and just above the horizon, outlined with the startling clarity of a marble-white sculptured figure seen against a background of Mediterranean blue, a huge cloud had piled up and spread out like a cauliflower stripped of its leaves, adding minute by minute to its immensity with moisture drawn up from some remote invisible source. Between cloud and earth a grey veil slanted, a warp without a woof, streaks of light and darkness alternating over the dimly perceived background of blue which was the sky itself.

On the surface of the land, however much its undisturbed immensity might seem a part of some remote age before the sixth day, life swarmed. It clustered around little groups of farm buildings spaced at wide intervals across the length and breadth of the

plain. The buildings, like the land on which they stood, conformed in outline to a single basic pattern which allowed of little variation: a two-storey frame house, square, weather-beaten, with sometimes a wide verandah running across the front; an indeterminate number of smaller buildings—granaries, machine-sheds, garages—alike in design and colour of paint; and sometimes a barn, often no more than a useless relic of an age now gone, left empty and exposed to the destruction of the years. From these groups of buildings huddled behind wind-breaks of poplar or carragana—their only guard against the wind which blew everlastingly upon them from across a thousand miles of plain—life spread out in tenuous threads to the great fields beyond. At intervals of less than a mile in every direction dust clouds rose and whirled away into the sky. And for the moment before its dispersion each cloud held in its centre a great machine drawing one or more of the complicated implements of modern agriculture, a machine controlled by a brown-skinned automaton in overalls seated behind the steering-wheel and stirring into life only when it became necessary to effect some adjustment to the tractor or pour more seed into the big grain-boxes of the seed-drill.

Within the range of vision of an observer standing in the centre of the great circle of plain, the congregation of life intensified at a dozen points, each point marked by the upthrust from the plain of from two to six or more tall bleak towers standing red-walled and black-roofed in a precise row like the guardsmen of some historic busbied regiment on parade. Within the shadow of each row of elevators lay a village, and the villagers, like the elevators, were distinguished only in their conformity to a rigidly conceived design: a single street, at right angles to the highway, false fronts rising on either side; tin signs projecting from the false fronts and creaking monotonously in the wind that stirred them without cessation all day long; frame two-storey houses set back from the main street; a confusion of shacks fringing the outskirts; hedges of carragana surrounding trim lawns, but more often no hedges and no lawns at all; and on the edge of the village limits the school-house, set squarely in the middle of a patch of ground which in flatness and absence of vegetation was a miniature of the great plain itself. Into each village

roads led from four points of the compass, roads that ran long miles as straight as the surveyor's chain could make them, thick pencilled lines across the surface of the plain dividing it with geometric precision into two-mile squares. Of these roads one, wider than the others and surfaced with gravel, carried the greatest burden of traffic. It was the highway which bound the villages together and led at last to the city, lying a hundred miles or more beyond the furthestmost row of elevators visible to the eye.

Along one of the lesser roads, running straight north from the village of Twin Buttes, so named from the two mounds of earth on its southern fringes rising fifty feet above the level of the surrounding plain, a car rattled over rutted tracks, noisily protesting the jolts which every moment threatened to tear its frame apart. "We're only seven miles from town," the driver explained to the woman who sat beside him, holding a sleeping child on her lap. "But it seems like seventy in these ruts. We're not kicking, though. Out here we love muddy roads."

He spoke like a man ill at ease and making small talk to cover an embarrassment which because it did not originate in a specific situation was all the more difficult to overcome. Most of the time since leaving town he had stared straight ahead, concentrating with unusual and unnecessary care on the business of driving. When he glanced out of the corner of his eye at the pair beside him he did so shyly and with something of wonder in his face as if he did not wholly believe what he saw. The woman, who had so far been sitting so that she could study the man's profile, now turned her attention to the landscape sliding past on either side.

"It's just the same as you said it was, Jim. Only . . ."

"Only what, dear?"

"Only bigger, somehow. And more obvious. But perhaps I think it's that way because it's new. You don't notice the little things at first."

"It's not so obvious as you think," he said. He slowed the car almost to a standstill and pointed west. "You wouldn't think, would you, that there was a river less than ten miles away?" He spoke eagerly, like a small child wishing to surprise an adult.

"But Jim, a lot can happen in ten miles."

"Not a river in a valley a mile wide. And hundreds of feet deep. The valley, I mean."

"But there's no sign," she said. "No banks that you can see. It must be like a crack in the face of the earth."

"That's it exactly. A crack a mile wide. And you don't know it exists until you're right into it. We'll drive over next Sunday."

For a minute he had been full of animation. Now the topic had exhausted itself and he was quiet, a troubled look on his face. He was staring straight ahead again, this time at a group of farm buildings a mile or less away, standing in the middle of a piece of uncultivated land a short distance back from the road. Even at that distance the neglected condition of the buildings was apparent. Perhaps they had been painted at some time, but if so the paint had long since peeled off, leaving the walls to stand naked and weather-beaten, a sombre indeterminate brownish-grey. As they drew nearer Norah could see that the hip roof of the big barn was oddly mottled, for in many places the shingles had blown away leaving only bare boards beneath. Around the farm-yard ran a stunted, ill-kempt wind-break of Russian poplar that seemed to be half-heartedly attempting to conceal the condition of the buildings from censorious eyes.

"I told you what the place was like, Norah," he said, speaking quickly as if he wished to blur the meaning of his words. "And I haven't had much time to fix things up since I got back. But it'll be this way for only a little while. Once the crop is in . . ."

Norah laid her hand on his arm. "It doesn't matter, Jim. We're together now. You and I and Phillip."

He looked at her directly and the tense lines about his mouth relaxed. For a minute a deeply-rutted mud-hole occupied his attention. Safely through, he glanced quickly at the child asleep on Norah's lap. "Can't get over it," he said. "He's grown a foot. Says words too. He'll be a man in no time. Have him doing chores in a week."

They both laughed, a little louder than was natural. Jim turned the car off the main road on to a dirt track running across a hundred yards of ploughed field to the farm-yard. The house stood at the end of the track, a square box from which two multi-paned windows with

coloured panels across the top stared like great eyes. Norah laughed again, and for the first time since leaving the train her laughter was real.

"Jim, it's human! It's alive!" She felt suddenly light-hearted, glad, and the emotion was intensified by its unexpectedness. "Like a fat old man," she said. "A fat old man who's had one too many and is sitting down in the middle of a weed patch leering at the pretty girls going by. You ought to paint his nose—the door, I mean—a bright red."

"The weeds are pretty thick all right," Jim said. "Stink-weed and Russian thistle mostly. They're easy to get rid of. Once the crop is in . . ."

He swung the car around the driveway in front of the house and stopped with a shivering jerk. He got out and took the child from Norah. He held him awkwardly, as if he were a piece of delicate pottery. "He's light," he said. "For a three-year-old." He spoke gravely, authority in his voice. "He'll get fat pretty quickly though. Lots of sun . . ., lots of fresh air . . ., lots to eat . . ."

His voice trailed off. Norah, moved to quick sympathy, looked up into his face. "Jim, Phillip and I love it here already."

Because just then she wanted more than anything else in the world to put Jim at his ease she spoke with conviction. She got out of the car and stood for a moment looking beyond him into the far distance. "It's different—but wonderful. More wonderful than I ever dreamed."

His face lit up. "Honest, Norah? I know it's all sort of bleak to an outsider. Not like the green hills of Erin."

The phrase was an unlucky one. Norah turned away so that he would not see the quick tears in her eyes. Now the hawthorn and the wild plum trees would be in bloom along the hedges at Innish-coolin, the tops of the mountains would be wreathed in scarves of delicate grey mist, and the rain might be falling like a gentle benediction so that the rich lovely smell of flower and shrub and the green earth itself would rise like incense and hang in the air, subtle, languorous and inescapable. But knowing already its menace, she steeled herself against the enchantment of things past, and followed Jim along the ill-defined path to the back of the house, and into the

low lean-to kitchen where the heat seemed to explode in her face as she stepped across the threshold.

The interior of the kitchen was clean, and to one who had seen only the outside almost startlingly bright. The brightness came not so much from any light admitted through the small narrow windows as from the shine of the new linoleum on the floor, from the high gloss varnish of the four chairs grouped with mathematical precision around the table, from the glitter of chromium plate on the big new iron range that stood in ponderous dominance at one end of the room, from the softer sheen of oilcloth wall-paper, patterned in a design of Dutch flower-pots and windmills. The curtains at the windows were fresh and gay, though the sombreros and cacti which patterned the white background clashed violently with the windmills and tulips on the walls, and the gaudy red flowers of no distinguishable species which splashed the linoleum. The immediate effect, after the drabness of the exterior, was exhilarating. Norah sat down on one of the stiff little varnished chairs, her legs suddenly weak under her.

"Norah," Jim said, "this is home."

She took the child from his arms and held the little body close to her own. "Home?" she said. "It seems so hard to believe, after all these years."

Jim led the way into the big comfortless living-room, spotless like the kitchen, brave with new furniture: an immense over-stuffed chest-erfield, two easy chairs to match, end-tables, radio cabinet, a linoleum rug which covered most of the splintered softwood floor. Norah stood quietly in the middle of the room looking about her with eyes that saw little. From the living-room they went up the steep narrow stairway into a bedroom where, in a cot as new as everything else in the house, they laid their sleeping child. Jim was disappointed by Norah's silence, disappointed that she said nothing at all. But he could not know that she was reliving in her mind the long agonizing succession of months and years and centuries between the time when she stood outside the pile of smoking rubble which had been the house she called home, and the moment which was now. Centuries of insecurity, of restless days and sleepless fear-filled nights when man's every thought and every act seemed to menace her hopes.

So that now, when fear and insecurity were at last vanquished, the sensation of relief was ecstatic beyond utterance. But because Jim misunderstood the cause of her silence he was unhappy and ill at ease.

"The neighbours helped," he said. "Mrs. McKinley cleaned up and chose the curtains and linoleum and things like that. Maybe I should have waited—you've got better taste, I know. But I wanted the inside at least to look homelike."

He broke off, quick apprehension in his eyes. "Norah, you're crying!"

She slid her arms about his neck and her kiss was a compound of the maternal and the nakedly passionate. "Darling Jim," she whispered. "Only because I'm so happy. And because I love you so much."

Later, when Phillip disturbed them with his loud howling, Norah sat up and put her hands to Jim's face. "Promise me, Jim," she said, "that you'll always look at me the way you do now."

He took her hands away from his face and held them in a grip so tight that she flinched pleasurably. "Is there any other way, acushla?"

The endearment came awkwardly from his lips. "Not that," she said smiling. "Only an Irishman can call you acushla so that it sounds the way it should. You have words of your own."

He nodded. "You're right, I guess. There's nothing much the matter with Norah."

"Not the way you say it."

She smoothed her hair, and her voice was suddenly matter-of-fact. "Come on, Jim, show me where things are. Phillip's hungry. So am I. Starving!"

"Gosh, Norah, I forgot to tell you. We're going over to the McKinleys for supper."

"Oh, Jim—not tonight!"

Too late Norah tried to stifle her cry of protest. Jim got up quickly off the bed, concern and astonishment in his face. "Norah, I'll phone right away and tell them we can't come—that the kid's sick or something. Mrs. McKinley thought that on your first night it would be a lot easier if you didn't have to worry about grub. I'm sorry! I just didn't think!"

Norah caught him by the arm. "But Jim, of course, we'll go. It's grand of Mrs. McKinley to think of us. It was just that . . . meeting new people, you know. Because I'm starting all over with you . . ."

He stood hesitant in the doorway. "Am I changed, Norah?"

"Silly," she said. "But we'll come home early, please. For Phillip's sake."

"Right after supper. The McKinleys will understand. But we'd better hurry. Supper is at six and it's after five now."

"We shouldn't like each other so much," Norah said. "Go away and give me ten minutes."

He kissed her and went off downstairs. When he returned a little later, Phillip, in a clean white suit, was clinging to his mother's knee and clamouring fretfully for food. Jim picked the child up and tossed him high in the air. "Keep your shirt on, youngster," he grinned. "Just half an hour to go."

Abruptly, as if the act was somehow distasteful to him and to be got over with quickly, he turned to Norah who was hastily applying her make-up in front of the dresser mirror. "Norah," he said, his embarrassment plain in his hesitation, "I'd sort of go easy on the lipstick."

She looked up in quick surprise. "But, Jim, it's for you! You used to like me to wear a lot."

"Still do," he said. "But you know how it is. I mean . . ."

With unnecessary deliberation Norah blotted away the lipstick on a piece of tissue. "I know, Jim," she said. "I'm on display tonight. And you don't want the home folk to think you were caught by a painted Jezebel. But don't ask me to wear a longer skirt. I haven't got one."

She spoke with exaggerated flippancy to cover her vexation. Understanding him, sympathizing with him, she could not help feeling that in deferring to community-mores Jim was somehow being less than fair. Her irritation was all the greater because it had in it some element of fear. For she apprehended, though dimly, that tonight Jim's loyalties were divided; that his sense of obligation to his own people was impelling him to urge in her modifications where before

he had found only perfection. A small thing, an absurdly small thing, and yet to be told, immediately after the fierce exultant act of love, that she must wash her face before appearing to his people!

But she was quick to curb her anger. I'm tired, she told herself, tired and foolish. He's nervous too. I was that way when he came to Innishcoolín—and there was only Uncle James.

She put away her lipstick. "I should have known," she said smiling. "All right now?"

He grinned sheepishly. "Silly of me, I guess. But you know how it is."

They drove north again along the rutted road, past neat farm-houses and endless miles of black earth and green grain. Norah no longer looked out over the fields with the strained intensity of the alien perpetually seeking some glimpse of a familiar object and perpetually disappointed. For the time she had given up struggling to comprehend the immensity of the scale of creation governing the visible world about her, content to concentrate her attention on soothing the hungry fretful child whom she held on her knee. But a mile or two along the road her interest stirred at sight of a great gaunt house, a house that must have held twenty rooms or more, set farther back from the road than any that Norah had so far seen in this new world. The driveway running between road and house was flanked on either side by evergreens, the trees set so closely together that they formed two seemingly impenetrable walls of green, running in precise lines for a quarter of a mile. The driveway between the green walls was overgrown with weeds; and about the house and its few adjoining outbuildings there were no signs of life.

"The Anderson place," Jim said, in answer to Norah's unspoken question. "Anders Anderson came out from Sweden sixty years ago. He homesteaded here when there wasn't a town within fifty miles nor a neighbour within ten. Fifteen years after he started he was farming two sections. In the early twenties he had five. That's thirty-two hundred acres. The Anderson house was a show place for miles around. He needed a big house for he had ten kids, and they all lived on the farm."

"I thought that farm families always drifted away," Norah said wisely.

"Not the Andersons. Not for a while, anyway. Why, they even had a swimming-pool. And a tennis court—though all the kids played baseball. And they had a garden like something you'd expect to see in the Old Country. And an orchard. Sort of place I'd like to have some day."

"Armstrong House," Norah said. "It sounds nice. But not twenty rooms, please. Not unless we have maids and a butler. What happened?"

"The old story. Old in this country anyway. Seven straight years of drought and dust. The kids went away one by one—school-teachers, garage hands—and two of the boys just dropped out of sight. Ten years ago the old man and Mrs. Anderson—everybody called them Anders and Anna—were alone and broke. They moved into a little granary because the big house was too much to keep up. Besides, it was driving them crazy, I guess, with no kids in it any more. They're dead now. The farm is all broken up. I've got a piece of it myself—one quarter. A lot of the buildings have been moved off, for granaries mostly. But the house is too big."

Norah shivered. "Not a very cheerful story."

"But not so bad. Anders and Anna had fifty years of happiness. That's more than you get in most lifetimes."

Norah was silent, thinking of her father, thinking of Aunt Lucy who had never had anything but the past to comfort her, of her mother dead so long ago that she was part of a dream which had no reality. "I suppose so," she said at last. "But is it usual? What happened to the Andersons, I mean?"

"It happened often enough. But it wasn't necessary. Oh, maybe it had to happen once so that we'd learn some things. The drought and dust will come again. But now we know what to expect. We won't be caught the way people were in the thirties. And when we get irrigation—think of it, Norah!—the whole country green and lush as far as you can see!"

"I know. Enough grain to feed all the people in the world and some left over for the hogs."

He laughed, and was quickly serious. "They were hard years,

bad years. Maybe they were good for us. They tell you adversity strengthens character. But it breaks lots of people—nice people—good people. I don't mean we want things easy all the time. But we can't let those years come again."

"They didn't hurt you, Jim," she said.

"I was just a kid. Dust and drought were my natural environment. I took them as a matter of course. But they killed my mother."

He was speaking hurriedly now, his voice rising as he spoke. "I shouldn't be telling you this maybe. But it'll help you to understand a lot of things about us—about me. She was just a kid when Dad brought her here to the house he'd just built. She was gay, full of life. Oh, I know what a lot of people said—she wasn't cut out to be a farmer's wife, she should never have left the city. Anyway, she died when she was forty. Folks said she couldn't take it. But I never once heard her complain."

"It must have been hard," Norah said, scarcely knowing that she was speaking her thoughts aloud. "Hard for you. . . ."

"Trouble was she lived to herself too much. Folks said she was proud; but it wasn't that. She just wasn't interested in people as such. And in those days you had to depend on others a lot. Maybe that's what was wrong. When she needed help, human sympathy I mean, it was too late."

Was he warning her? she wondered. And wondering she felt again a faint stirring of resentment. He spoke only in kindness she knew, but without complete trust. But she fought her resentment down. "Was she very beautiful?" she said.

"I thought so."

His voice became abrupt, matter-of-fact. "I tell you we can't let those years come again. Not with a kid of our own to think of." And he looked at Phillip with eyes no longer puzzled and uncertain. There was pride in them now, honest and without arrogance.

Norah ran her fingers through Phillip's tousled curls. "He's growing up, Jim," she said almost wistfully. "Soon he'll be ready for school. Will he have far to walk?" There was an anxious maternal note in her voice. It was hard to think of a little boy—somehow she couldn't visualize Phillip as ever being bigger than he

was now—lunch pail in hand, plodding along one of these straight endless roads under a lonely immensity of sky. Jim laughed indulgently.

"That's another thing about the West that's changed," he said. "Oh, there are still some rural schools, lots of them, in fact. But they're getting fewer every year. Phillip will go to school in Twin Buttes."

"But, Jim!" Norah gasped. "Seven miles!"

"The school bus will pick him up," Jim explained. "Bring him home at night."

"I guess it's a good thing," he said after a while. "The old school I went to wasn't much. In the winter-time we often sat with our coats on till noon, the room was so cold. And when the weather was really bad we had to close up. Just the same," he added musingly, "the old school was the centre of our lives, somehow: dances, socials, Sunday services, political meetings. It's different now. We don't seem to be a community any more."

"But the children must be taught so much better in town," Norah argued, caressing Phillip's legs. She was glad that they would not have to carry him to school every day.

"Maybe," Jim said non-committally. "Only you don't learn how to live in a country like this out of text-books."

The McKinley farm was well-ordered and prosperous. House and outbuildings were in faultless repair, brave in new coats of paint. The machines in the open sheds were numerous and most of them new, the big car standing in front of the garage a late model. Mrs. McKinley waited at the door, her husband somewhere in the shadows behind her. She was a tall woman of uncertain age, whose brown weather-beaten complexion contrasted incongruously with the elaborate pattern of her new dress. Norah, meeting Mrs. McKinley's eyes, said to herself, "She doesn't like me. I wonder why?" and went ahead of Jim and Phillip into the living-room which opened off the dark hallway.

Now she wanted to turn and run for the room was full of people and she did not know what she was going to say to them. She wanted to be alone with Jim and Phillip, free to do nothing, say

nothing—only relax and forget the countless petty irritations, the incredible weariness of body, the lassitude of spirit, which were the accompaniments of six thousand miles of journeying. But now she was smiling mechanically at the blurred circle of faces around her, hearing names mumbled in her ear but making no effort at all to associate them with any of the faces. Oh God, she said wordlessly, please take me out of here! But there was no one to listen, not even Jim who stood tense at her elbow, holding Phillip by the hand and responding in quick nervous phrases to voices that came from somewhere far away and had no meaning at all.

Then the blurring cleared and Norah saw that there were only four people in the room whom she did not know. And miraculously all the names came back, not jumbled but in proper sequence, so that she knew the person to whom each name belonged. There was big Judd McKinley, the titular head of the household, sixty years of age she guessed and like his wife lean to the point of angularity; Olaf Sorenson, a pale-eyed, pale-haired Scandinavian of indeterminate features who wrung her hand with a blacksmith's grip and mumbled brief incoherencies before relapsing into red-faced silence; a woman, tall, fair-haired, green-eyed, whose clipped words of greeting contrasted oddly with the wide sensual mouth which shaped them; and in the background a dark hatchet face, lantern-jawed, ugly under a shock of grey-black hair, a face she had seen in a thousand subtle variations in her own land.

"You're Irish, Mr. Malory," she said.

His handshake was strong, and sustained a thought longer than the conventional. "From Sligo. Yeats and I."

For a moment when he smiled Norah almost forgot where she was. But beside her a small shrill voice cried out insistently and when she turned to comfort her son the weariness and irritation came back. "We'll talk some day, Mrs. Armstrong," Malory said, and receded into a background beyond the ring of faces and babble of voices which seemed to press in upon her with an insistence which had in it something of menace.

What followed had the quality of a sustained and inescapable nightmare. The living-room where they ate their meal was almost unbearably hot, for there was a fire in the huge square oil heater

which had not yet been removed for the summer months, and Norah, in her Donegal tweeds and thick brogues—for she had had no time to unpack—felt faint and nauseated. Phillip, sitting beside her on an apple box placed across a kitchen chair, whined nervously; when he upset his glass of milk Norah spoke to him sharply and felt at once the force of Mrs. McKinley's reproving stare.

"Accidents will happen," Mrs. McKinley said. "No use cryin' over spilt milk. Poor little feller's all tuckered out."

Mrs. McKinley's conversation, so Norah had already discovered, consisted mostly of hoary proverbs delivered with the force of prophetic conviction. Norah fought back her resentment and her tears and struggled hopelessly with the plateful of rich food in front of her, fearing to give offence if she did not eat, fearing to be ill if she did; all the while doing her best to answer the innumerable questions with which the McKinleys bombarded her. "Jim here, he sprung a big surprise on us," Mrs. McKinley said, her look at once fond and reproving. "We always thought he was the kind who would be pretty slow to marry."

"Git a man away from his own manure-pile no tellin' how hog-wild he'll run," Judd McKinley philosophized loudly. Then conscious of his wife's angry eye he gulped a mouthful of hot tea and sucked noisily at his drooping moustaches.

That was it, Norah thought, Jim had surprised them. And they did not like surprises. They wanted things to go the way they thought they should. Subconsciously she was thinking not just of the McKinleys and the others at the table tonight, but of all the people in the square houses crouched behind carragana and poplar and evergreen wind-breaks, and of the people in the houses clustered in the shadow of the great elevators, whom she had never met. Jim had surprised them all. Now, from behind the wind-breaks, from within the shadows, they were watching her. Just as the people at the table tonight were watching her: the McKinleys, friendly, garrulous, suspicious because she was an alien and strange and outside the range of their experience; the hatchet-faced Malory, whose thoughts she could hardly guess at but who might be a friend; and the woman with the green eyes and wide scarlet mouth, sitting silent, withdrawn, speaking only in monosyllables. They were all watching.

Watching and waiting. Waiting for the word which would enable them to place her among the damned. Waiting for the act which would fall outside the limits of community mores and take its perpetrator with it. And like a knife twisting slowly in her heart was the instinctive knowledge that Jim was no longer at her side; that he sat in the ranks of the watchers. The only difference between them and him was that he watched not in malice but in fear. Olaf Sorensen, the hired man, alone seemed oblivious of her presence. He sat with bowed head, stuffing food into his capacious mouth with the precision and regularity of an automaton. But even he from time to time lifted his pale eyes to her face in a quick furtive stare of incomprehension and mistrust.

Yes, she told them, it had been a long trip. And tiresome. But everyone had been most kind. She had been seasick only two days. After that she had not missed a meal. And Phillip had been as good as gold. Yes, she said, Canada was a big country. But everyone was most kind. She was sure that she would soon feel at home. And it was wonderful to be able to buy whatever you wanted without the bother of ration cards and queues. Yes, the house did need fixing up a bit, but only on the outside. The inside was comfortable and charming. It was so kind of Mrs. McKinley to help Jim choose linoleum and curtain material. No, men didn't have many ideas about such things. No, she wasn't homesick. She looked straight into Brian Malory's face as she said it and he stared back insolently as if to tell her she was lying. "Things are different here," Mrs. McKinley said. She did not elaborate because there was no need. Everyone at the table knew that different meant better. It was a statement of faith. All around the table, so it seemed to Norah, heads bowed for a moment reverently in obeisance to the creed. All except one. There was laughter at the corners of Brian Malory's thin mouth. Not the kind of laughter Norah liked but the kind which at the moment she best understood. Suddenly she felt no longer alone. She was not the only stranger at the table.

They drove home in a long hushed twilight. The sun had gone down but the western sky was still red along the horizon. "I'm so

sorry, Jim," Norah said. "We let you down, Phillip and I. But we're so tired."

"The little beggar's poohed all right," Jim said. "He'll feel better in the morning."

Because he did not deny her assertion that she had let him down Norah was silent for a long time. But after a while, when they had passed the Anderson place and seen the house standing dark and old against the crimson sky, she spoke again. "Jim, who is Brian Malory?"

"A neighbour," Jim said. "He farms a half three miles west—out Mud Cr  ek way. A brother Irishman. But I guess you know."

"Has he been out long?"

"Nearly twenty years, I guess. Folks say he got mixed up in the I.R.A. He's like that—always agin the government. But nobody really knows. He doesn't make much of a fist at farming, and doesn't seem to care."

"A remittance man?"

"Maybe. He keeps to himself a lot. He was in the Army for a while but never got overseas. Folks say he's got a crush on Gail Anderson. I wouldn't know."

"The girl at supper tonight?"

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

"One of the family from the big house. The youngest. Her mother must have been middle-aged when Gail was born. She was in the C.W.A.C.'s during the war. Now she's back teaching—school called Paradise Vale. It's about the only country school left around here."

"It must be like coming back among ghosts."

"I told you there were no ghosts in the West," he said.

She did not answer because she was thinking about something. Thinking about the way the McKinleys had looked at her, the way the people in the houses behind the wind-breaks would look at her—suspiciously, with a sense of outrage. They had expected Jim to marry Gail Anderson. Before the war they had been sweethearts. She knew that somehow, without having to ask anyone. And remembering the woman who had sat across from her at supper, the woman who had appraised her with eyes that were penetrating and cold and

malicious, she sat closer to Jim and laid one hand on his knee for assurance. You're mine, she thought, not hers or anyone else's. Just mine. And she kept saying the words over and over to herself until they drove up their own driveway and stopped in front of the grey silent house which was home.

Later, when Phillip was sound asleep in his crib and the essentials of unpacking had been completed, Jim and Norah went outside and stood where they could look out across the prairie, a flat monotone now, barely separated from the sky by a few last lingering streaks of light that lay along the horizon far to the north-west. It looked, Norah thought, like a region from which the hand of God had been withdrawn before the act of creation was complete; the foundation was there, but nothing lifted above its flat uniformity except a few bleak ridges, miles away, which were no more than hardly perceived imperfections in the creator's grand design. She shivered in spite of herself. Jim slipped his arm about her waist and held her close.

"Cold?" he said. "The nights always cool off here. One good thing about the climate, you can always sleep."

"No," she said, "not cold." Then she added irrelevantly, "I feel as if I want to run."

"Run? Run where?"

"Not anywhere. Just run. Until I get to the horizon. To see if there's anything beyond."

"There isn't anything beyond," Jim said. "Anything different, that is."

Norah shivered again. "I *am* cold," she said. "We'd better go inside."

CHAPTER 3

THE RAIN HAD BEEN FALLING INTERMITTENTLY SINCE EARLY morning. Now in mid-afternoon the clouds, which for an hour or more had shown signs of breaking, closed up again and the rain came down steadily from a grey blanket which hung, so it seemed, only a few hundred feet above the earth. Norah looked out of the living-room window at the puddles of water forming in the yard and shrugged her shoulders. The gesture was not characteristic; it expressed a mood which affected her rarely. "Jim," she said, "let's go for a walk."

Jim was stretched at full length on the chesterfield, an open book lying on his chest. He blinked sleepily. "Walk? On a day like this? It's raining."

"What of it? We'll bundle Phillip up well. He's got an oilskin slicker somewhere, and a big sou'-wester hat. We'll take turns carrying him piggy back."

"But Norah, there just isn't anywhere to walk. This isn't like the Old Country."

"Can't we just walk without going anywhere?"

He got up off the couch then and came over to her side. "People out here don't walk in the rain, Norah. Unless we get caught in it, and then we usually run. It seems a lot wetter somehow here than in Ireland. I've never seen anyone out in the rain for pleasure."

Norah's shoulders stiffened under the weight of his arm. "Jim," she said, "I don't care what you do or don't do out here. I'm going for a walk."

She felt rather than saw his surprise. But he did not try to dissuade her. "Good idea," he said briefly. "Give you an appetite for supper. But it's back to the old chesterfield for me. I'll look after the kid when he wakes."

Reluctantly, although she tried to appear indifferent, Norah went upstairs to change. She wanted Jim to come walking with her, even though Phillip would be a nuisance, and because he had scoffed at her overtures she felt a small sense of injured pride. And while she changed her clothes she marshalled in her mind, without full consciousness of what she was doing, the petty grievances which in the past few days had been slowly growing into something larger than trivial. For three weeks now, from the day of her arrival at the farm, things had been strained and hectic. Jim was up every morning long before she was properly awake, and away to the fields after a hasty and inadequate breakfast. He had insisted that daybreak was too early for any woman to be up, and after one or two experimental risings with the dawn she had not demurred. But staying in bed till six or seven o'clock meant that she did not see Jim during the day at all, except for a few brief minutes at noon when he rushed in from work to gulp down the substantial meal she had prepared for him, seldom stopping long enough for his tea to cool. And he worked not only as long as the daylight lasted but long into the night, guiding his tractor in the light of the powerful electric lamps with which it was equipped. When he tore himself away from the field at last it was to come in tired out, hardly able to stay awake long enough to eat the hot supper which she always had ready for him. When they went to bed at the same time—and this was seldom, for one or the other always had odd jobs to do after supper—Jim was usually sound asleep before Norah blew the light out. "This is spring in the West," he had told her. "We all work this way for a month or two, then relax till fall. Except, of course, for the summer-fallowing. Winter is our real holiday—five months of it usually. No strain, no worry, no work. The crop's off and you don't care about the weather. Winter is when we live."

She accepted all that. She knew that now Jim was drugged by hard work and long hours to the point of stupor, knew that she could not expect to have him for companion and lover during the few hours that remained to him after his day's work was over. But it was a new idea that love-making might be regulated according to season. "I can hardly wait for winter," she said to Jim one night, just

before she got into bed beside him, and to her delight he got red in the face.

This morning at breakfast he had been excited, boastful, like a small boy. "Looks like a soaker," he said, trying without success to control the tremor in his voice. "Just when we need it. Wait till you see the wheat jump out of the ground as soon as the sun begins to shine. Give us a little heat after this and you'll *hear* things grow. She's a great country—when it rains."

Norah poured herself a second cup of coffee. At home she had always drunk tea, but Jim liked coffee for breakfast and supper and it was too much trouble to make both. "Let's celebrate," she said.

"Celebrate? How?"

"I don't know. Go for a walk maybe. Or drive to town and buy something. Anything. . . . Have supper at Lee Wong's. . . ."

"Road's too slippery," he said. "We'd likely be in the ditch before we got a hundred yards. We'll do our celebrating when the crop's off. Think of it, Norah, four hundred acres at thirty to the acre!"

"There's a quaint old saying around Innishcoolín," Norah said, "about not counting your chickens before they're hatched. Ever hear it?"

Jim grinned and did not say anything more. After breakfast he helped her with the dishes, did a few odd jobs about the house, such as oiling the squeaky hinges of the living-room door and tacking down a corner of the kitchen linoleum, then lay down on the chesterfield where he spent the rest of the morning alternately reading and cat-napping. Norah did not blame him; she knew that he was tired, so tired that complete relaxation was in fact impossible; that because his mind was so preoccupied with the problems of seed-time he could do no more, even when he had the opportunity, than doze fitfully, lulled into snatches of uneasy slumber by the monotonous drum-beat of rain on the roof.

Norah cleaned the house but only perfunctorily, knowing that it would be mud-tracked long before night, and then played for a while with Phillip in the kitchen. She felt restless and ill at ease. She looked at Jim stretched out on the chesterfield, eyes closed, mouth open ever so slightly, his dark hair falling in tumbled confusion over

his forehead, and she thought, I'm not his mistress any longer, I'm his woman. And though she laughed at herself for thinking so, the thought persisted and gave her no pleasure. I need fresh air, she told herself, I'm getting childish.

It was then that the longing came to her again for a brisk walk down some side-road where there might be violets growing, and the ubiquitous buffalo-beans for certain, and perhaps some late crocuses in sheltered places where the sun had not scorched them. It was not Jim's refusal to accompany her that hurt so much as his inability to understand why she wanted to go.

She changed into sweater, tweed skirt and brogues, and paused before the dresser mirror long enough to slash a lip-stick heavily across her mouth. There would be no one but Jim to see; and knowing that, he would approve. When she came downstairs he stirred but did not open his eyes. Phillip was sound asleep in his cot; he would not wake up for an hour yet, and when he did Jim would hear him instantly. She put on her raincoat which hung, unused until today, on a hook behind the kitchen door, tied an oilskin kerchief over her hair, and went out, closing the door very quietly behind her.

The rain was falling almost straight down and the air was soft and cool. At first she thought that the strangeness she felt was the rain's doing; for this was the first time since she had come to the prairies that more than a few drops had fallen. But after she had plodded along the road for half a mile or more, the mud clinging tenaciously to her brogues, she realized that there was no wind blowing. It had blown steadily for three weeks, sometimes with no more than gentle monotonous persistence, once or twice with a violence that raised huge dust clouds from the fields and caused Jim's face to tighten into lines of apprehension. But now there was no sound except the soft swish of raindrops falling on the grass along the roadway, and the squelching of mud and water beneath her brogues. Once she crossed the ditch and walked for a short distance on the narrow strip of grassland between ditch and field; but weeds and briars growing thickly there soon drove her back to the lesser evil of mud and water.

For no reason that she could understand the quietness oppressed her. Perhaps she was used by now to the wind's noises, so that their absence created a sub-conscious tension which common sense could not justify. And she could not help feeling that the silence which lay oppressively round her was in some mysterious way the silence of concealment. A line from *The Eve of St. Agnes* crossed her mind, one that Miss Bates, the hawk-nosed little spinster who taught literature at St. Aidan's had raved about: "noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness"—and for the first time she knew what Keats had meant.

The house was out of sight now, and no other farmstead was visible through the rain which, falling gently, seemed to reascend from the earth in a fine clinging mist. Underneath the low-hanging clouds the land slid away out of sight. Between herself and the contracted circle of its disappearance there was nothing that lived. But she tramped steadily on. The rain dampened her cheeks and straightened such locks of hair as escaped from beneath her kerchief into lank strands. She liked the feel of the rain on her face, for it reminded her of home.

The rain lightened as she walked. Soon, in the field ahead, she saw the gaunt outline of the Anderson house standing naked at the end of the long dark line of evergreens. She reached the point where the Anderson driveway formed a right angle with the road, and hesitated a moment before turning in past a few slabs of crumbling cement which marked the place where a massive gate had once stood. But when she reached the driveway, now only a weed-ridden track, she walked quickly between the rows of evergreens towards the house. Maybe there are ghosts inside, she thought, but at least they'll be company.

She laughed out loud at her fancy, and the sound of her own laughter startled her. She stood still in the driveway, glancing almost furtively from side to side. There was nothing to see or hear. Not even a rabbit stirred in the evergreens. Soon she went on to the end of the driveway and up steps overgrown with weeds springing from a thousand gaping cracks in the cement, to a wide porch which ran across the front of the house. Once, perhaps, the verandah had been glassed in all the way round, but there was no way of telling at a glance. There was no glass anywhere about the house now; all

the windows were broken and even the big front door had been taken away, no doubt to stand in massive disproportion at the entrance to some meaner dwelling. Norah stood in the empty doorway, indecisive, peering into the wide dark hall beyond. She did not know why she hesitated, only that she wished there was sunlight streaming in through the empty door-frame and the broken windows to scatter the gloom inside. Again she laughed at her fancies, this time consciously, and walked down the hallway past the wide rotting staircase leading upwards to regions where she did not dare to penetrate. There were doors, many doors it seemed, along the hallway on both sides. She opened one at random and stepped into the room beyond.

It was, she supposed, the living-room. The dimensions were huge, and there was a stone fire-place at one end, built perhaps with stones gathered in the neighbourhood. The fire-place, a luxurious novelty in this country she was sure, was the only surviving evidence in the room of former grandeur. Everything removable had long since been taken away, even the window-frames and the panelling which must at one time have covered the walls halfway to the ceiling. Dust lay inches thick on the floor, dust criss-crossed by a thousand tiny tracks which to the idle fancy suggested a deliberately conceived intricate design. The mice were the sole inhabitants of the great house which once had echoed to the footsteps and voices of Anders and Anna Anderson and their ten children.

Norah did not stay long in the big desolate room. There was nothing to see and the quiet frightened her. Not the way the quiet of the empty rooms in Aunt Lucy's house had frightened her, for here there was no suggestion of decay and death, only of that immense loneliness which seemed so much a part of the silence-haunted world about her, a sentient loneliness concentrated in the room which so short a time before had been the triumphant fruition of long years of work and hope and dreams. Thinking of the house which she and Jim would build some day, she could not help wondering if it too would come to such an end as this. She repeated the words which Jim had spoken the day of her coming: "We can't let those years come back," and found comfort in them. But a small doubt persisted in her mind which no remembered words could wholly triumph over. Was there somewhere a force beyond reck-

oning, which no provision against weather or the vagaries of the market or the thousand and one other ills which menaced the landowner could overcome? A force latent in the things around her which were intangible and beyond reach of the senses, things which were the atmosphere of the land and not its visible physical realities, things which she had felt without hearing or seeing, which she could neither name nor understand?

She could not stay inside any longer. The big room, the hallway, the ghostly winding staircase—she wanted to run from them far away and think of them afterwards when the sun was shining and there was warmth and laughter and human companionship close at hand. But at the doorway leading to the verandah she paused, and pausing heard behind her, faint but unmistakable, the sound of a woman crying.

Afterwards she knew that had it been almost any other sound—the scurrying of a mouse across a dusty floor, the creaking of a board or the banging of a loose shutter in a vagrant gust of wind—she must have run from the house in terror. But the sound she heard, perhaps because it recorded so intensely a purely human quality, had in it nothing to fear. She turned without hesitation and walking back along the hallway opened a door near the farther end.

A woman was sitting on a pile of lumber in the middle of the room. When Norah opened the door she started up with a small cry.

"I'm sorry, Miss Anderson," Norah said. "I thought the house was empty."

Gail Anderson stared at her but made no sound. There was an expression of curiously mingled anger and shame in her face. "You have as much right here as I have," she said at last. Deliberately she turned her back. But in her movement there was no hint of contempt. Norah, suddenly embarrassed and in spite of Gail's words feeling more than ever an intruder, tried to think of something casual to say, something to break the tension investing the gloom-ridden room in which she stood. But the words would not come. Gail Anderson turned round and spoke composedly. "I've tried not to come back. But today I couldn't help it."

Norah sat down on the pile of dusty lumber. She felt that Gail Anderson did not want her to go, although there was nothing in

Gail's words or attitude to encourage such a belief. "It must be hard," Norah said, "when you were so happy here."

Gail Anderson's face was a still white mask in the dusk. She lit a cigarette and flicked the match carelessly against the wall. Then she sat down beside Norah and inhaled deeply. "Sorry you caught me making a fool of myself," she said. "I always feel sentimental on a rainy day."

The brusque matter-of-factness in her voice discouraged any overtures of sympathy. Norah took her cue. "You don't feel sentimental very often, then," she said.

"No. It's just as well."

Gail smoked in silence. They sat side by side on the pile of rotting lumber but they were, Norah thought, a thousand miles apart. There was no word, no gesture that could bridge the gulf. She felt helpless, more alone than when she had stood by herself in the great empty living-room, believing that there was no other person near. Now Gail turned and looked at her directly. There was the faintest expression of curiosity on her face.

"What do you think of us here anyway?"

"You've all been awfully kind . . ." Norah began. But even before she caught the contemptuous curl of Gail's red mouth she knew that she was saying the wrong things. "But that isn't really what you want to hear."

"Not really. You might save the clichés for chummy welcome gatherings like the one we had at the McKinleys. Some day perhaps you'll tell me what you really think."

"But I don't know myself yet."

Gail got up and slowly ground her cigarette-butt into the floor with her heel. "Mother would have been heart-broken if she'd thought I'd ever smoke. Old-fashioned, you know. But it became her somehow. She was the kind of person you didn't like to hurt."

She stood up very straight and still, a magnificent animal, Norah thought, the kind men must have hungered after, tall, long-legged, full-hipped, Diana in the flesh—or was it Aphrodite she was thinking of, Aphrodite rising from the sea, the sea-foam grey against the whiteness of her flesh? But it didn't matter. Gail's body was beautiful in a way that made you think of white sculptured marble coming to

life under the hands of the sculptor who loved it. But it was the face that really held you, a face that in spite of smooth unlined skin was somehow old, and wise with the kind of wisdom that brought with it no serenity of spirit. The focal points were the green shadowed eyes, unnaturally large under thin sharply pencilled brows, and the wide red mouth. They were the eyes and mouth of a woman who had learned a great deal. Except how to be at peace.

"I'm going now," Gail said. "This place gives me the creeps."

Norah got up quickly. The atmosphere of the room was cold and suffocating. At the door leading into the hallway Gail paused. "We called this room the library," she said. "Dad was a great reader. We had a lot of books, good books. Dad hated the radio and wouldn't allow one in here. This was a quiet room. I liked it."

"Does it hurt to come back?"

The question was foolish, Norah knew, but she could not think of anything else to say. Gail Anderson did not bother to answer. She fastened the belt of her raincoat closer about her slim waist and pulled the door shut behind her. Norah followed down the hallway and out to the verandah. The rain was no more than a light drizzle now and there were breaks in the low-hanging ceiling of cloud.

"I wish I had the courage to burn the place," Gail said unexpectedly. "It would be so easy. Better than seeing it go piece by piece to patch up somebody's barns."

Norah thought of the smouldering ruin which had been her last glimpse of the old stone house at home, the hideous conglomeration of granite and mortar which sepulchred the bodies of her father and Aunt Lucy. She shuddered and hurried down the steps of the verandah, almost falling in her haste, for the steps were wet and treacherous. "I suppose so," she said at last. "The pain goes away sooner then."

And she added, because she could not help herself, "You must have been very happy here."

"Very happy," Gail said.

They walked together without speaking down the long silent avenue between the rows of crowding evergreens. When they reached the road Gail stopped. "Good-bye," she said abruptly. "I'll come to see you some night after school."

"I'll be glad," Norah said. "It's lonely sometimes."

Gail looked at her curiously. "That's heresy," she said. "People here don't feel that way any more. Not with cars and radios and party lines so that you can listen in on everybody's business. We're fully civilized now."

She was repeating almost word for word something that Jim had said long ago. Only, the intonation was different. Norah felt vaguely bewildered. "Cars and radios should make a difference. It's my fault, I know. There's really no reason why one should feel lonely."

"Isn't there?"

The green eyes seemed to mock her, adding to her confusion.

"But there shouldn't be," she said lamely.

Gail Anderson did not seem to be listening. "Have you ever thought," she said, "how little all those things really matter?—a car that takes you to town in half an hour, a radio that brings you breakfast clubs and soap-operas and news broadcasts ten times a day, and recipes and advice on why you're not invited to your neighbour's parties. They've got nothing to do with anything that matters. Not out here."

"But I don't understand," Norah said helplessly. "What is it that matters?"

"I wish I knew. The earth itself, I guess. It's alive. But not in the way people think. Because it grows crops and looks pretty sometimes, people call it the good earth. I don't."

Norah was beginning to feel faintly frightened. Frightened because what she herself had felt obscurely a short time before, felt and dreaded, was being articulated by a stranger. Gail Anderson's words were an intrusion upon her privacy, a violation of something which because it had been a feeling, an emotion rather than a conscious thought, was in some manner sacred, a part of her soul. "But people get their living from the earth," she said. "Why shouldn't they think it good? They're happy here . . ."

"Are they?" There was sudden swift challenge in Gail's voice. "Oh, I know we're supposed to be. We tell each other we are. Luckiest people on earth! Look at the Europeans, see what *they*'ve suffered. Look at the Chinese—send them a few bags of rice. *We'll*

never miss it. 'We're well-off—we're happy as little larks all the day long.'

"But, Miss Anderson," Norah interrupted, "I don't see . . ."

"That it's all bluff? Bluff and ignorance! Maybe you will some day." Gail's eyes were hot, angry. "There are lots of ways of starving. And the earth is greedy, Norah. It gives—but it always takes back. That's the real balance of nature. Before you conquer your few acres you pay the price. The earth always wins in the end."

She nodded in the direction of the old house. "We Andersons conquered the earth. It didn't seem so hard at the time. But we paid. It's a hungry earth, Norah. It feeds on our hopes—on us."

"But you had your share of happiness," Norah said. It was strange how Jim's words kept coming back to her. Only, when she repeated them they didn't seem to mean the same.

Gail looked away. "Have you ever wondered about the way we talk of happiness?" She spoke slowly, as if trying to think something through aloud. "I mean the way you did just now. *Our share*. We always say *our share*. We get our little dole and we're supposed to be satisfied. As if there's just so much and we have to watch the distribution to see that somebody else doesn't get more than we do. And if he does we're angry, cheated."

"But I don't see why people can't enjoy life here," Norah persisted. "Make a success of themselves . . ."

"No reason. Except that the earth won't let them."

Suddenly Gail Anderson laughed. "I'm sorry, Norah. I've got the blues today. I didn't mean to upset you. I'll be over to see you soon, happy and in my right mind. I just shouldn't have gone to the house today. Honestly, I didn't mean a word I said just now. You and Jim will be happy, I know."

Norah did not say anything. She looked away, troubled and ill at ease. Gail Anderson came close and laid her hand on Norah's shoulder. "Jim's a dear," she said. "You're lucky."

She turned quickly away and started off up the road in the direction opposite to the one which Norah would take. Norah watched her until she was out of sight. Gail did not look back, as Norah half-expected her to do. She walked rapidly, with a long swinging stride, which, however, had nothing of the masculine in it; and

there was a kind of purposiveness in her walk which seemed to have less to do with an objective to be reached than something to be escaped. She's running away, Norah thought, from the house, from me.

She felt unexpectedly tired. She was used to walking long distances and there was no physical reason why she should have felt the weariness which came upon her now. She started back along the road with reluctant dragging step. The rain had stopped altogether now and there were occasional fleeting patches of clear blue overhead. But the road was heavy with mud which clung to her shoes even more tenaciously, it seemed, than before. Once she stopped and sat down on the steep side of the ditch, where a slight depression had necessitated a fill-in on the road, stared intently into the shallow pool of water lying at the bottom, and tried hard not to think of anything at all. But the silence, as always now, made her ill at ease. It was better to be walking so that she had no time to listen for the sounds which never came, no time to remember the gloomy house which she had just left, no time to recall Gail Anderson's white face in the dusk within, her angry haunted eyes, or the way she had spoken of Jim—"Jim's a dear, you're lucky"—in a tone that told better than the words themselves the secret of her unhappiness. So Norah got up and without bothering to brush away the damp leaves and grass which clung to her skirt struggled wearily on through the mud, wishing she were at home with Jim and Phillip, secure among her own.

A meadowlark perched on a telephone pole threw back his head and clear-voiced, exultant, ran through his complicated glittering scale. Norah heard him with a sudden lift of heart. There were things alive around her, sounds, music—and unexpectedly a human voice.

She answered Brian Malory's cheerful hail. He appeared from a side-road, riding a rangy bay horse. He must have been in sight a long time before, for with the lifting of the mist it was now possible to see far across the prairie, but she had been walking with her head down. She went on expectantly. Malory slid to the ground and walked to meet her, leading his horse by the bridle reins.

"It's easy to see you're new to the country," he greeted her. "Or else in trouble. Out here we don't go for walks on rainy days."

"So Jim told me," Norah said.

"And couldn't you persuade him to change his mind?"

The question was good-humoured, disinterested, no more than a pleasantry which did not require an answer. But Norah was faintly uneasy. "He stayed behind to look after Phillip," she said.

"You're tired, Norah."

"I *am* tired," she confessed, grateful for the change of subject. "I feel as if I'd walked a hundred miles. Your western mud is very sticky. I seem to be carrying an acre of land on each foot."

She had not seen Malory very clearly that night at the McKinley house because there had been so much to distract her. He was a tall spare man, as tall as Jim almost, but lighter of frame. His features were irregular: the nose curved, the thin-lipped mouth too wide for the rest of his face, the eyes deep-set, slightly oblique. Just now they were kindly, concerned.

"Climb up on Wolfe here," he said. "I'll take you to your gate."

She hesitated, looking at the clumsy western saddle. "But I don't know how . . ." she began.

"To get up? It's all right," he assured her. "You have nice legs."

Norah laughed, and after one fumbling failure managed to place a toe in the heavy wooden stirrup. Holding on to the horn of the saddle she pulled herself up. Malory looked at her appraisingly.

"You've ridden before," he said.

"Not very often," Norah said. "My Uncle James of Innishcoolin had an old cob and I rode him about the farm sometimes. But tell me, why do you call your horse Wolfe? Do you hunt wolves on him?"

"After Wolfe Tone," Malory said. And he did not smile.

Wolfe Tone, the Irish patriot who had cut his throat in 1798 when his revolt against the English failed. There were some old songs about him that Norah had heard. It was an odd way Malory had chosen to do honour to a national hero, she thought, but she did not say what she was thinking. "He may be Irish but I don't feel very much at home up here," she said.

"Only on a horse?" Malory looked up as he spoke. His eyes were

no longer concerned. They expressed curiosity perhaps, but nothing more.

Norah felt a kind of subtle antagonism stirring deep inside her, an antagonism which had no origin in logic. She resented the assurance with which Malory asked his question, as if he knew beforehand what her answer must be. She was resolved to disappoint him. "Only on a horse," she said. "There's no reason, is there, why I shouldn't be at home everywhere else?"

He was silent then and for a time walked on steadily beside Wolfe, his chin tucked into the upturned collar of his slicker. But soon he looked up again. "You're not telling the truth, you know," he said.

"What makes you so sure?"

Surprisingly he avoided a categorical answer. "Home," he said, "is something you don't have to earn. A poet said that. But you have to feel it. And that's harder to come by than earning."

She did not contradict him. "I know," she said. "People aren't everything." Again she found herself marvelling at the way things Jim had said kept coming back to her.

Malory's eyes betrayed his interest. "You're perceptive, Norah. Why do you say that?"

"Jim told me," she said.

Malory laughed. Somehow his laughter did not seem quite genuine. "Jim's right. But I wish you had thought of it yourself."

She was annoyed then. Malory's words seemed a deliberate attempt to separate her from Jim, to cut her off from his influence and wisdom. For a moment she was tempted to stop Wolfe and dismount; but she was sufficiently in control of her emotions to visualize the impossibility of disengaging herself from the cumbersome unfamiliar stock saddle with enough dignity to avoid appearing ridiculous. Besides, her anger was unreasonable, a tempest in a tea-pot.

Unexpectedly Malory laughed. "Pretty mad, aren't you, Norah? I'm sorry." There was a twinkle now in his smoky black eyes.

Norah nodded, stiffly and for the moment unforgiving. Then because she wanted at all costs to avoid a revelation of feeling, she sought safer ground. "Do you miss Ireland very much?"

He considered her question for a moment before answering.

"Perhaps if I knew I was free to go back I wouldn't miss it so much. This is a grand country, Norah, but empty. There's no life here—*real* life, that is. Life's a continuous thing. Here we have only the present."

Norah nodded wisely. "No traditions—no gods."

Abruptly Malory changed the subject. "Jim's a good chap, Norah, a fine chap. You're lucky."

Norah remembered Gail Anderson's words, remembered the feeling which had clothed their banality, giving them a kind of pathos which had nothing in common with the subtle hint of patronage in Malory's way of speaking. "That's what Gail Anderson told me an hour ago," she said.

"Where did you see Gail Anderson?"

"In the old house. I walked there. I hadn't intended to go in, but it looked interesting."

"What was she doing there?"

"Trying to lay some ghosts, I think. And trying to get up enough nerve to burn the place down. But she wasn't able to do either."

Talking about Gail Anderson gave her the whip hand. She could not resist a probing question, though she knew that she asked it at some risk to herself. It was hard, somehow, to separate Gail and Jim in her mind. "She seems to have been badly hurt some time. I wonder how? She's hard on the surface, but underneath . . ."

"Gail's a sentimentalist." Malory spoke with a vehemence that startled her. "Going to the old house and mourning over the past—that's adolescent."

"She said she hadn't been there for a long time."

"Perhaps not. But she dramatizes herself and everything that happens to her. That's why she seems unhappy. It's a pose. There's no reason why she should be unhappy, particularly."

"No reason at all?"

He was silent at that. He did not say anything more until they reached the point where the trail running to the house angled away from the road. "I'll leave you here," Malory said. "I'll look the other way if you like when you get off. I think you'll get all tangled up."

"It's all right since you like my legs," Norah told him.

She scrambled to the ground laughing and he reached out an arm to steady her. "You're doing fine," he said. "You'll be a westerner in no time at all."

"And will that be a good thing, do you think?"

He did not answer, but swung into the saddle with the easy assurance of one to whom riding is more than mere pastime. "I'll see you soon, Norah," he said. "And we'll never quarrel. We've got too much in common for that."

Again she had to fight down a swift unreasonable surge of anger. In spite of the resistance of her will he seemed to be drawing her to his side away from everyone else, and from Jim most of all. "You must come as soon as you can," she said. "Jim will be glad to see you."

She underlined the name ever so slightly. Malory smiled. "And you, Norah?"

"I'm always glad to see Jim's friends."

She looked at him steadily, trying to tell him with her eyes that she resented him. But she could not help feeling that she was being slightly ridiculous. After all, Malory had said nothing, done nothing, at which she could rationally take offence. "Of course, I'll be glad to see you, Brian," she said, and felt a civilized adult again.

He touched his hat. "Good-bye, Norah," he said.

He swung Wolfe around and rode at a brisk trot back the way they had come. Norah started across the field to the house, all the time following the retreating horseman with her eyes. When she was halfway to the house Malory turned and waved to her without slackening pace. She did not want him to know that she had been watching, but she waved back just the same, because she could not help herself.

She hurried round to the back of the house and opened the kitchen door. With a shrill, "Hi, Mummy!" Phillip scuttled across the kitchen floor and catapulted himself into her arms. She held him close and kissed him on the cheeks, the tip of his button nose, the nape of his neck so unbelievably soft and warm. Jim stood in the background somewhere, smiling down at them. Norah felt safe and happy.

"Had a good walk?" Jim said.

"Splendid. Except that I missed my men."

"We've been busy," Jim said. "Busy as beavers."

There was a fire in the big range and the heat was comforting. The kitchen was filled with the smell of cooking foods—good smells to whet an appetite which Norah found suddenly acute. "We saw you and Brian coming down the road," Jim explained, "so we slapped on the bacon and eggs."

"I helped Daddy," Phillip crowed. "I set the table. Look, Mummy, look!"

Norah looked at the living-room table over which dishes and cutlery were strewn in wild disorder. "Why, it's wonderful, Phillip!" she exclaimed. "You've worked so hard!"

"Like a nigger," Jim said. "He broke only one cup."

Norah laughed and took off her wet raincoat. She hung it behind the kitchen door and hurried upstairs, Phillip toiling faithfully at her heels. With a feeling of unusual exhilaration she changed into the new dress she had bought only two days before in Twin Buttes, a clinging white silk Jersey with gay red buttons and red plastic belt. She had been vaguely unhappy about the dress the minute after she bought it, knowing that it wasn't practical when one had an active small boy to look after. But now, looking at herself in the dresser mirror she was glad, for the dress became her and she knew that Jim would like it. And she put on stockings, nylons long and sheer and delicate, which were for best. "They're for Daddy too," she told Phillip, who stood watching her with the rapt absorption of a small boy to whom a vision of something new and strange and wonderful has just been vouchsafed. But she caught herself wondering what Brian Malory would think of her legs now, soft gleaming silk from toe to thigh, and was annoyed.

When she came down to the living-room the table was in order and supper ready. She helped Phillip into his high chair and fastened his gaily-coloured Mickey Mouse bib around his chubby neck. "We're a hungry family, Daddy," she said to Jim. "Your wife and son are famished."

He came around the table and when she straightened up slid his arms about her waist and kissed her. "You're beautiful tonight, Norah."

"Only tonight?"

He smiled without speaking. "I'm glad," Norah said. "Glad

you missed me—glad I'm beautiful." And she laughed because just then there was no place else in the world she wanted to be.

Phillip laughed too and banged his silver spoon against his plate. "Hi, Mummy!" he shouted. "Hi, Daddy!"

Norah sat down in her place at the head of the table. She had tried without success to persuade Jim that she was usurping his rightful position; but he did not like to serve and she had given up argument. "Brian came along while I was sloshing through the mud," she said. "He gave me a ride on Wolfe. He says I've got nice legs."

"Brian should know," Jim said. "I thought he'd be coming in to supper. That's why there's so much bacon. I put some in the pan for him."

"I didn't ask him in," Norah said. She felt embarrassed. "I know I should have. I wasn't very hospitable, I suppose. But somehow, I wanted to be alone tonight—just the three of us."

Jim was quiet then and she caught herself wondering if he was thinking of his mother. She had never liked people much. "Brian's a good egg," he said after a while. "But it's better this way. He's hard to keep up with."

"I don't think I like him very much," Norah said. "He's too curious."

"I hadn't noticed," Jim said. "About what?"

She almost said about my soul, but she pulled herself up in time. It would be too hard to explain what she meant when she didn't really know herself. "Oh, this and that," she said vaguely. "Mostly you and me."

She was glad that Jim showed no more interest in Malory. She wanted to enjoy this hour and the companionship of Jim and Phillip without bothering about the way in which peoples' minds, including her own, worked. Reflection and analysis were irritants, she thought. Just now she wanted no part of them.

After supper Jim and Norah played with Phillip in the living-room—a riotous game of hide-and-seek that threatened more than one article of furniture. When Phillip was asleep Jim helped Norah with the dishes. Afterwards they listened to the radio in a desultory sort of way, and played cribbage. Jim had taught Norah the game at Innishcoolín soon after they were married, and now she glee-

fully beat him three times running. Later, when they sat drinking tea she thought, with a glad lift of heart, "I've won;" but the game of cards was remote from her mind. Because she was safe within four walls with those she loved, the world outside had ceased almost to be. Because all life that had meaning was concentrated within a narrow space, anything lying outside that space did not matter. She knew that wherever she went the walls of her home would be around her, invisible, but as sure a protection against the earth's menace as they were now in their substantial reality.

But just before she and Jim went to bed something happened which for the moment was sufficient to disturb the sense of security so newly won. She was sitting at the dressing-table in her night-gown brushing her hair, when she saw in the mirror the reflection of the open window behind her at the opposite side of the room. The blind was up and a full moon rode the skies, bloated, yellow and, because it was well above the horizon, only a little lop-sided. For no reason that she could explain she felt cold, though the night air was soft and there was no wind blowing. She got up quickly and pulled down the window blind. As she did so Jim came into the room.

"Blind down on a night like this?" he said. "I always like a window you see out of. Especially when there's moonlight."

"I used to," Norah said. "I don't any more."

Jim nodded wisely. "Bombers' nights."

"No, not that. Something I can't explain. I feel safer somehow."

"When I was a kid," Jim said, "there was a window at the foot of my bed. I liked to lie awake and look at the stars. Then one night for no reason at all I got to thinking about them. Something happened. I jumped out of bed, pulled down the blind and dived back under the bedclothes. Sort of hysteria, I guess. The terror of infinite space I've heard it called."

"Lots of people have felt it," Norah said. "But it isn't that either."

She raised the blind high and looked out. "It's beautiful," she said. "Beautiful and still."

Then, as if the volition came from some source beyond control of her conscious will, she pulled the blind down as far as it would go and fled to the shelter of her husband's arms.

CHAPTER 4

NORAH TUCKED PHILLIP'S STRIPED COTTON JERSEY INTO HIS brief shorts and kissed him quickly on the back of the neck. She liked kissing him there best of all, perhaps, as Jim said, because it was the least sticky of the exposed parts. "There you are, son," she said. "Now run outside and play. And please, Phillip, be a good boy and keep clean. Just for ten minutes. Daddy will have the car out and we'll be ready to go then."

Phillip wagged his head gravely. "I'll try, Mummy," he said. He ran through the open kitchen door, tripped at the top of the steps and fell headlong to the bottom. But he was a sturdy child and did not cry. He picked himself up at once, grinned into Norah's apprehensive face above him, and trotted out of sight around a corner of the kitchen. Norah pulled the screen door shut, and after stopping long enough to pick up Phillip's discarded clothes which littered the kitchen floor, went slowly upstairs. On the landing she paused, stricken dumb by the apparition which stood framed in the doorway of the bed-room.

"How do you like me?" Jim said.

Norah stared at him, her eyes round with astonishment. "Oh, Jim," she said at last, "you look awful!"

She began to laugh then, and Jim joined her. He wore a faded jockey cap, rumpled grey short-sleeved shirt with the name TWIN BUTTES spelled out in huge red letters across the front, trousers that looked like exaggerated plus-fours ending half-way between knee and ankle, and below them faded stockings patterned in alternating red and yellow stripes which gave to the legs they encased the appearance of overblown misshapen candy-sticks. Norah had never seen a baseball uniform before; the effect, she thought, was hideous.

"Guess it gives you quite a shock the first time," Jim conceded. "Especially when you've been brought up on cricket and flannels and blazers. Better not come too close. The moth-balls smell pretty strong."

Pretending to hold her nose Norah went past him into the bedroom. "I wish you'd go down and keep an eye on Phillip," she said. "I'll be just a minute."

"Better hustle," Jim warned. "We play at eleven-thirty sharp." And he clumped off downstairs whistling happily to himself.

Norah slipped on a brightly coloured cotton dress and ran a comb through her hair. She looked at herself in the mirror without interest. Already she was hot and tired although it was only mid-morning, and there were tiny beads of perspiration on her forehead, just below the hair-line. A button on her dress had come loose, and her eyebrows needed trimming, but she had no time to pick up needle or tweezers. If only she and Jim and Phillip were going by themselves on a *real* picnic to some shaded spot by the river which to Norah was still no more than a name, and on such a day as this a tormenting vision of unattainable coolness and rest! When Jim had told her of the picnic, a week or more ago, she had been thrilled and glad. "Jim," she said, "that's a marvellous idea! I've been wanting to go so much, but I didn't like to ask you, because you've been busy. We'll take a lunch—a big lunch—and stay all day, can't we please? And you and I'll go swimming! I've got a bathing suit that covers hardly any of me and if we're in a private place I won't wear anything at all! And Phillip can paddle at the edge."

"Hold on, Norah," Jim interrupted laughing. "This isn't a family jaunt. It's a community picnic—sports day. In Twin Buttes. The whole world will be there. Our world, anyway."

He was pleased, and did not see the disappointment in her face. "What's more," he went on, "your old man is going to play ball."

"Play ball?" she said blankly. "You mean football?"

"Baseball. I used to be pretty good. But, of course, I haven't played for years. I'll probably disgrace the family. But all the old-timers will be pretty rusty."

"But you won't be playing all day?"

"Maybe no, maybe yes. There's a tournament—eight teams.

Two hundred dollars for the winner. We may get knocked out first thing. We play early."

"Is baseball like cricket?" Norah asked vaguely, seeing again, though the images were blurred and indistinct, green fields and white-clad figures moving across the greenness like automatons responsive to a recurring impulse signalled by the sharp, intensely clear crack of bat against ball. Jim laughed, condescendingly she thought, and promised that some day he would explain to her in detail the points of difference—all of them, he implied, in favour of baseball—which distinguished the two games.

"We don't stop for tea half-way through," he said. "That'll do for a start."

Now, dabbing half-heartedly at her face with a powder-puff, she felt more strongly than ever before the urge to escape from the arid hotness of the great circle of earth lying all around her, to some shadowy refuge where there would be coolness and peace. But she could not tell Jim how she felt. Not when he was waiting eagerly, like a small boy in anticipation of the circus, for the moment when he would step out on the dusty playing field (she was sure it would be dusty though she had never seen it) before the eyes of his friends and neighbours. They're counting on him, she said to herself. He can't let them down just because it's a hot day. I musn't ask him to take us to the river. For she could not admit, even in the privacy of her own thoughts, that he would not be responsive to her wishes the moment he knew what they were.

When she came downstairs the car was at the door. Jim and Phillip were waiting in the front seat. "The kid found some mud around the rain-barrel," Jim said. "I didn't want to bother you so I gave him a clean-up myself. I guess I missed a few spots, though."

The clean-up had been quite inadequate but Norah did not care. "He'll be a lot worse before the day's over," she said, getting into the car. She always had trouble closing the door on her side. Now she sat passively while Jim reached across her and pulled the door shut with a loud bang.

"Jim," she said, "it's hot."

"Best thing in the world for the old pitching arm," he said, pretending to flex his biceps. "Norah, you look awfully pretty."

She smiled an answer and felt better. She knew that Jim was proud of her, that a part of his pleasure in the day would be in the knowledge that she was being seen by the neighbours. Apprehensive sometimes he was, as he had been that awful first night at the McKinleys, but proud always. Proud because he thought her beautiful. That was why she could never give lodging to resentment against him for long, even when he seemed to be most lacking in consideration of what she wished. For such disregard was never deliberate. And Norah thought to herself, I understand him so much better than he understands me. There was a small, an admittedly petty pleasure in the consciousness of superior insight. Jim was a great boy, and like all boys thoughtless and impulsive and lovable.

They reached the highway. Dust, raised by a long procession of cars ahead, hung over the road like a heavy brown pall. "I told you it would be a big day," Jim said. "Nothing quite like it in the Old Country."

No, there was nothing quite like it in the Old Country. Not the race-meets she had gone to with her father, before Aunt Lucy had had enough power over him to forbid his going; not the monthly fairs at Innishcoolín where farmers for miles about chattered long and loud with the prospective buyers of their pigs and cattle—some of the buyers from as far away as England—and afterwards drank up their luckpennies in smelly taverns and turned the usually quiet nighttime into a bedlam of noise and confusion and unaccustomed bucolic merriment. The race-meets and the fairs at home were an accepted part of living; the Sports Day at Twin Buttes was an exotic addition, an Event. It was a day set apart from all others for the observance of rituals already as sacred to the prairie dweller as the Maypole dance or All-Hallow's Eve to his ancestor centuries removed in time and ten thousand miles in space.

"Jim," Norah said, "I hear a band."

"They're playing records over the public address system."

Norah laughed to herself at the pretentiousness of the name but she did not say anything for Jim would not have understood her mirth. They drove down the main street of the village and over the rutted trail leading to the sports ground, behind a steady stream of cars that advanced like great beetles upon some immediately attain-

able objective. "The world and his wife will be there," Jim said. "The biggest show since the war."

Norah took her handkerchief away from her mouth long enough to ask a question. "Will there be anything to see except baseball?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. Oh, there will be races for the kids and, of course, soft-ball for the women. But you won't find things dull. You'll be able to get acquainted with your neighbours."

People to see and talk to, thousands of them. The world and his wife all right. Only, on a day like this Norah didn't want to talk to anybody at all. She wanted to lie on her back in soft green grass and look up at the sky through the leafy branches of a tree with moss about the base of its ageless trunk—a tree such as she had not seen since coming to the prairies—and listen to the sound of water, clear water running over rocks and white sand. She didn't want to talk to anyone, except Jim and Phillip now and then. She didn't want to think about anything except how cool it was under the tree and how the water would look when she sat on the bank and let her bare feet dangle in it. But she wasn't going to see or hear any of these things; she was going to see and hear the world and his wife.

Jim parked at the end of a great semicircle of cars whose central point was the tall wire backstop behind what he called—for no intelligible reason—the home plate. He opened the car door and got out, his eyes suddenly alive with anticipation. "The boys will be out on the diamond in a minute," he said. "I'd better warm up. I'm pitching this one."

He took his baseball glove from the back seat and raised it in smiling salute. "Wish me luck, Norah!" he said; and without waiting for her answer hurried off to join a group of young men dressed in costumes as outrageously ugly as his own, who were tossing baseballs back and forth to one another in front of the wire backstop, their tanned faces screwed into painful and unaccustomed lines of concentration.

The sky was hard, burnished, an intense clear blue that seemed actually to reflect from its concavity the brassy sunlight down upon the earth in a concentration of scorching heat-rays which penetrated with ease everything opposing them. The metal on the car door was hot to touch. And there was no use, Norah found, in turning

down the windows of the car, for the wind thus admitted blew with the hotness and ferocity of a furnace blast. It brought with it fine particles of dust that filtered in everywhere, through car windows, floor-boards, into hair and clothes, even between closed lips and eyelids.

Norah got out of the car and sat down in front with her back against the bumper. Things were a little better outside. There was some shade from the car, and the fires of heaven were now diffused instead of being concentrated within a narrow suffocating space. But there was no escape from the wind and dust. And now Phillip, who so far had been sufficiently interested in the novel spectacle before his eyes of vast and sustained movement as to have been hypnotized into brief and deceptive passivity, sprang suddenly into violent action. He saw his father walking slowly across the baseball field and immediately his fat little legs were in twinkling motion, his voice lifted into a shrill squeal of joyous recognition—"Hi, Daddy, hi, Daddy!"

He had reached the edge of the field before Norah caught him. His protests, when she picked him up and carried him back to the car, were loud and prolonged. Jim waved to her and showed his teeth in a cheerful grin. Norah waved back half-heartedly. "Phillip," she said to the child who was squirming to escape from her grasp, "Daddy's busy. He *can't* play with you now."

"But I want him, Mummy, I want him!" Phillip explained, his small face puckered with earnestness.

Norah sat down, holding Phillip tight. But she could not continue to do so indefinitely. His grubby little hands were all about her face and neck, his busy churning bare feet pulled her skirt high above her knees. "Phillip," Norah said desperately, "I've got a nice slip on but I don't want the whole world to know. Watch Daddy just for a minute—dear heaven! just for a minute!"

Phillip looked at his father who was standing in the middle of the baseball field holding the ball high over his head in what seemed to Norah a fantastic and incomprehensible pose. "I want ice-cream," he said. "Lots of ice-cream."

But at least, Norah thought, after she had battled her way through the crowd surrounding the refreshment stand and bought an ice-

cream cone for Phillip, she didn't have to talk to anyone. If only she could relax completely, forgetful of the small boy now happily smearing his face with fast melting ice-cream, if only she could concentrate her attention whenever she felt like doing so on the grotesque figures performing their frantic gyrations on the dusty field to the accompaniment of a din such as she had never heard in her life before—if only she could do these things the long day which stretched ahead of her might be almost endurable. But she could not relax, not with a gad-fly like Phillip in her keeping, a three-year-old mad with excitement, charged with explosive energy which might detonate at any moment, not when her ears were deafened by an unending racket compounded of vociferous bellows, screams of anguish and delight, verbal insults and shrill incitements to victory.

Soon even the privilege of not talking to anyone was denied her. First, Mrs. McKinley with two friends from Twin Buttes bore down upon her. Mrs. McKinley was having a good time. Her pleasure was obvious in her eyes, her manner, the heartiness with which she addressed Norah. "Jim creaks a little at the joints," she said. "But he's doing fine. And you're looking well, Mrs. Armstrong."

"Am I?" said Norah wanly. "Thanks."

Mrs. McKinley introduced her two friends. Norah did not catch their names and did not care. She smiled at them mechanically and answered their conventional questions patly from her little store of stock answers. When at last they went away, with assurances that they would 'drop in' some day soon, Norah watched them go with mingled sensations of relief and vague concern. She was glad that she did not have to talk any more, but she could not help wondering why it was that everyone was having a wonderful time except herself. It wasn't just that she was a stranger. There must be some incapacity in her that these other people didn't suffer from, an inability to rise above the physical discomforts which they took as a matter of course. It's the heat, she told herself; you have to get used to it.

The heat you had to put up with; it was inescapable. But there were some things she didn't want to get used to—the dust, the raucous sustained noise, the hard white glare of sunlight on withered grass.

But she had little time now to think of these things for Mrs.

McKinley and her friends were the first of a procession—a procession of women hot and flushed and happy and garrulous; women whom she had met, so they told her, on Saturday night in Twin Buttes or Thursday afternoon in Twin Buttes. “Don’t you remember, Mrs. Armstrong, Jim introduced us just outside the Co-Op?”—or in the meat-market or the post-office or the hardware. And sometimes she remembered. Mrs. Cliff, for instance, the ruddy-cheeked white-haired little Scotswoman who lived on a farm next to Brian Malory’s,—“A good-for-nothing scalawag, Mrs. Armstrong, but a gentleman. I’m no denyin’ he’s a gentleman.” And Mrs. Cliff’s daughter, Jeannie Stoddard, as thin as her mother was stout, a babe in her arms and two small children tugging at her inadequate skirts. And the minister’s wife, whose pale sallow face reflected a curious disquietude of spirit at variance with the almost studied languor of her movements. “We’ll call soon—my husband and I—so busy just now.” Mechanically she repeated the platitudes appropriate to her position; and Norah felt a sympathetic stirring of the blood for she knew that the minister’s wife didn’t like talking to people either, not on a hot day when the babel of the infernal regions was loose on every side.

There were others whom she had never seen before, who introduced themselves because they were curious and sought to satisfy their curiosity in the most direct way they knew. To their questions Norah returned her unvarying stock answers, the threadbare little phrases which had nothing to do with whatever she thought or felt, but served their purpose. All the time she was wondering, will I be like them soon? She hoped not. They were enjoying themselves and she was bored and miserable, but she did not feel envious. The admission to herself of a sense of superiority brought with it no accompanying feeling of guilt. She was glad now to have Phillip with her, for pursuing him was an excuse to break off conversations which threatened to become unendurable; and each of his increasingly frequent trips to the out-door privy, set in an entirely inadequate clump of bushes near the dance pavilion, provided an escape of minutes’ duration from the questions and answers game which the rest of the time she seemed committed to play.

But the one woman with whom Norah wanted to talk did not speak to her. Gail Anderson smiled and passed by—a smile and

a nod, no more than that. She looked cool and lovely in a white summer dress, longer than most, which clung to her slim straight legs and cast into relief the fine proportions of her body. She knows how to dress, Norah thought—for men. Seeing Gail she had half-stopped on her way back from the refreshment booth with Phillip and smiled her friendliest smile. When Gail passed on, remote and untouchable, she felt a quick stab of resentment. But she's not that way really, she thought. I know her. It was some small consolation to feel that she had looked behind the immaculate mask and seen if only fleetingly, the human being it concealed from the world.

An unusually raucous outburst of cheering marked the end of the baseball game. Jim came to Norah quickly and she was glad he had not delayed. His face was sticky with dust-streaked perspiration, his mouth stretched wide in a grin of triumph. "Well, Norah, what did you think of it?"

"Jim, you were splendid. Everyone said so. I was so proud of you."

And she added faintly, "Who won?"

For just a moment Jim looked startled. "We did," he said smiling. "Six-four. If that means anything to you. Hungry?"

"Not a bit," Norah said. "I've had an ice-cream cone and a drink of warm pop. That's enough on a day like this."

"Guess you're right," Jim said. "But . . . hey, what's going on here?"

With a shrill war-whoop Phillip flung himself against his father's legs and struggled mightily to drag him down. Jim bent over, caught the child under the armpits and swung him high above his head. "How are you, old-timer?" he yelled. "Want to be a ball-player like Daddy?"

"Oh, Jim," Norah cried, "please put him down. He's eaten too much. He'll be sick!"

She spoke too late. Presently Phillip, uttering pathetic assurances that he was feeling fine, lay stretched out on the back seat of the car, his curly hair soaked with perspiration. "He'll be all right in a little while," Norah said. "Maybe he'll drop off to sleep. That would be the best thing for him. For me, too." And she did her best to smile.

"I'm sorry, Norah," Jim said. "This isn't much fun for you. And the worst of it is I've got to leave you. The second round begins right

away. I've just got time for a hot-dog before we play again. But I guess maybe some of the women-folk will rally round."

"I shouldn't be surprised," Norah said. "They've been rallying around all morning." She hoped there was no trace of sarcasm in her voice. "And I'm glad you're doing so well."

Jim looked at her irresolutely. "Maybe it would have been better if we'd lost."

"Jim, please don't talk that way. I'm having a grand time, really I am." She tried hard to speak enthusiastically, for his concern was clear in his face. "You can't let the side down, you know."

"No," he agreed. "Wouldn't be cricket, would it?"

"Not cricket," she said solemnly.

He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "So long, Norah. You're pretty swell."

She got into the front seat of the car, shut the door and tried to make herself as small as she could. Perhaps if she were very quiet no one would notice her. She closed her eyes, and by concentrating her thoughts on things far away, sought to shut out the waves of sound beating against her ear-drums. But there were some sounds which no power of the will could deny—the frantic undisciplined cheering; the hooting of automobile horns, constant and meaningless; the voice, magnified to distortion by the loud-speaker of the public address system, calling attention to the events going on at different parts of the field, and from time to time directing crude witticisms at such prominent Twin Buttes citizens as had the misfortune to stray within the orbit of the announcer's sight. And lest the swarming multitudes be left for a moment with no more than the babel of their own creating to distract them, recorded outpourings of *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, *Il Bacio*, and—incongruously—*The Skaters' Waltz* filled in the occasional breaks in the flow of announcement and comment.

If only the heat were a little less vindictive, Norah thought, these other things might be endurable. Jim had told her that the heat in the West was unlike heat anywhere else; it was dry, bracing, he had said, although with a disarming grin. It was dry all right, and its dryness scorched and blistered. Looking at the hard blue sky she could not think that she would ever feel rain on her face again.

She shut her eyes tightly, hoping to sleep. A tap on the window of the car disturbed her. She opened her eyes and saw Brian Malory smiling at her. She sat up straight and pulled her skirt over her knees. "Hello," she said.

He opened the door and slid in beside her. "The precautions weren't necessary," he said. "Having a good time?"

"Not very. It's too hot. And Phillip has been sick."

"You look cool enough."

"Thanks. I don't feel it."

The conversation was stupid. Not even Brian Malory could arouse life in her.

"Had enough baseball?"

"I suppose you have to know the game pretty well to appreciate it," Norah said non-committally. "How is Jim playing?"

"As usual. He's good. He doesn't seem to have lost anything."

Malory puffed at his pipe and blew smoke out through the car window. "It's going to be hotter in an hour or two."

Norah passed her hand across her eyes. "I don't like to play the role of broken-hearted exile, Brian, but I'd give just about everything I possess for an hour of Innishcoolín. Just think of feeling mist on your face again, and watching the wisps of cloud curl around the mountain tops . . ."

"And the grass, Norah . . . dear God, the grass! Just to look at, and to roll in if you happen to feel like it. And the way there are no straight lines anywhere, but everything up and down and nothing flat except maybe a bog and even it's as likely as not to be on the back of a mountain!"

Norah opened the white bag which lay on her lap and looked at her face in a small mirror. "Tell me, Brian, am I drying up and withering away? Is my skin like leather and my hair dry wisps of corn silk? Because that's how I feel."

"Norah," Brian said, "this isn't the place for me to be telling you how you look. See here, Jim will be busy all day. His team will be sure to go straight through to the finals. He won't miss you very much."

"No," Norah said in a small voice. "Not very much."

"Well then, why shouldn't you and Phillip and I slip away to the river for an hour or two? It'll be cool there, and green in spots."

"I don't believe it," Norah said. "There are no rivers in this country. There couldn't be. Only mirages."

"This river is real," Brian said. "Norah, you must come—so that you'll be able to believe."

For a little while, no more than seconds perhaps, though it seemed much longer, Norah struggled with herself. But quickly and without conscious intent she marshalled in her mind arguments to support the course of action she wanted to follow. Jim would not miss her; she had seen him for no more than five minutes all morning; Phillip was ill, he needed coolness and the feel of running water over his bare feet. There was nothing she could do to help him, staying where she was. Really it was unfair of Jim to expect her to spend the afternoon sweltering in the remorseless heat while he, with the enthusiasm of a small boy, played a game in which she took no interest. Her mind was made up almost before Malory had finished speaking. But she was wise enough not to acknowledge at once her acquiescence.

"Sounds tempting," she said, trying to suggest a judicial frame of mind. "But Jim might not be pleased."

The moment she spoke she knew that her words were unfortunate. They expressed no decision, but invited explanations which she was not prepared to give. To her relief Malory did not seem to take what she said seriously. "So you're the oppressed peasant wife," he mocked. "Come now, Norah, you mustn't bring Jim into this. It's your pleasure we consult and no one else's."

"Not even yours?"

"Mine is dependent on your own," he countered quickly. "But I'd like to get you away from here. Please say yes, Norah. Because if you don't I'll feel compelled to sit here with you and blister and talk to you about Ireland, and Phillip will come out in a heat rash . . ."

She interrupted him, laughing. "Please stop, Brian. Of course we'll go, for a little while. But I must let Jim know. He might be anxious."

"We'll leave word with the scorer as we go by," Malory said. "Jim is out of reach at present. He's just stolen second base."

"Sounds wicked," Norah said. "But I suppose it's all right. Everybody's cheering."

While Malory went off to find the scorer Norah dubiously awakened Phillip, who had been sleeping soundly on the back seat. Immediately upon opening his eyes he set up a clamour for ice-cream.

"Feeling better, aren't yòu?" Norah said, lifting him in her arms and kissing his moist forehead. "But no more ice-cream for a long time, young man. What do you think? We're going for a ride in Mr. Malory's car."

Malory came back swiftly from his errand. He picked Phillip up and set him on his shoulder. "Everything's arranged," he said. They walked past the refreshment booth where people, hot, thirsty and excited, were packed shoulder to shoulder and three deep; past the smaller stand where the ladies of the Twin Buttes Legion Auxiliary sold hot-dogs and hamburgers; past the field where husky girls in blue denim jeans and sweat-shirts played a game as incomprehensible to Norah as baseball; and came at last to Brian's battered coupe, parked just outside the entrance gate.

Norah scrambled in, laughing. "Brian," she said, "I think we are observed."

He started the engine and slid the clutch into low gear. "By not more than a thousand women," he said. "Do you mind?"

"I don't mind. Take us away quick. I want to breathe again."

Brian drove down the village street where cars were parked hub-cap to hub-cap—a street almost deserted except for the crowd swirling restlessly about the door of the beer-parlour in the ramshackle corner hotel—and on to the highway. Above the highway the dust hung for a moment, penetrating, blinding, before being swept away by the wind.

"Tell me," Norah said, "will there be dust by the river?"

"No dust," Brian said. "Only mud."

He followed the highway for a mile or two, then made a right-angled turn into a side-road. "But, Brian," Norah said. "You've deceived me. There's no river here."

Before her eyes the plain stretched to the horizon, flat as a table except where the shimmering heat waves created illusory curving lines just above the level of the land, the colours—brown and

green and black—which stood out clearly near at hand, blending in the distance into an indeterminate brownish grey. There was no break that she could see anywhere in the monotonous flatness, not even so much as a mound of earth.

"You've deceived me," she repeated.

"The West doesn't surprise you very often," Brian said. "But this time . . ."

He turned on to a trail that wound with vagrant indecision across the prairie, a trail whose convolutions must have been created, so Norah thought, by the whim of the first man to make a track in the grass with his wagon wheels. "He must have been drunk," she said aloud, hardly aware that she was speaking.

"The only explanation," Malory agreed. "Look."

With an unexpectedness that took Norah's breath away they were hanging on the rim of a great opening in the earth, an immense valley with almost perpendicular walls which had appeared below them, as if a great crack had but this moment split the surface of the earth beneath the wheels of the car. The valley was wide—miles across, Norah thought, when she was able to look at it composedly; and a silver thread of water, no more than an insignificant brook, writhed along the valley floor, now doubling back upon itself in an all but complete circle, now swerving away from the centre near to the base of one or other of the valley walls rising hundreds of feet above the floor.

"But Brian," she gasped, "is it real?"

He laughed gleefully at the note of genuine wonder in her voice. "It's real, Norah. In Ireland now you might think the little folk were playing tricks on you. But there are no little folk in this country."

"That's what Jim says."

"I wouldn't have thought it of him," Malory said. But Norah was too much absorbed in the scene below to pay heed to his words.

"It looks like a scar," she said. "A wound that's healed."

For there was growth in the valley. Grass which at a distance looked lushly green; and trees—willows, she guessed—growing alongside the stream, in places so thickly that they seemed to reach out over the water from either side to form a canopy of dark green

which interrupted the continuity of the silver thread of water tracing its uncertain course along the valley floor. And there were trees growing up the side of the valley and along the dry water-courses which cut through the valley walls at irregular intervals, big trees some of them, giving off a strange aromatic odour from their shiny green leaves. As Brian drove slowly down the trail which swung back and forth across the steep slope of the valley she saw great masses of wild roses in bloom, and many flowers she had never seen before.

They reached the bottom at last and Norah breathed lightly again. "I was frightened," she said, and laughed to show her relief.

"I'm sorry, Norah. It's quite safe in second gear. Phillip enjoyed it, anyway."

Already Phillip was shouting to do it over again. But the promise of new wonders to come pacified him, wonders which were realized minutes later when Brian stopped the car in the shadow of a grove of poplars, past which the river flowed between deeply channelled banks. The river was a small, slow-moving stream no more than a creek, but a delight beyond coherent utterance to a small boy whose recollections of a body of water larger than a puddle in the yard at home were already dim.

The grass was green around the poplar grove and along the bank—green and soft and cool. Norah threw herself down at full length and let the grass caress her face. "Brian, it is real!" she cried. "And so quiet."

She sat up then and caught Phillip in her arms and laughed joyously with him. Malory lit his pipe and squatted on his haunches beside them.

"You can see the highway bridge from here," he said, pointing down the valley to where a skeleton of thin girders seemed to hang above the stream as if suspended in space by invisible chains. "There's a good place for swimming about a hundred yards the other side. But here we have the place to ourselves."

For the time her only emotion was one of gratitude, because she was glad to be far away from any congregation of humanity, to be free of the awful social obligation of making conversation with people in whom she felt no interest. But later, when Phillip had

been persuaded to lie down on an old rug spread out in the shade of the poplars, where he had promptly and gratifyingly fallen asleep, and Norah was dangling her bare feet in the water of the sluggish stream—strange that there was brightness and sparkle in it only from a distance—she remembered his words. She remembered them with curiosity and no disquiet.

"Why do you want us to have the place to ourselves?" she asked idly.

Malory, now sprawled flat on his back, his wide-brimmed hat shading his eyes, spoke sleepily. "Because you'd had about all the noise you could stand. Even half-a-dozen youngsters in swimming can make more racket than a penful of hungry hogs."

It was far from the answer she had expected and for a moment she was annoyed. But she gave no sign, and thought of other things. It was strange how much higher the walls of the valley looked from where she was sitting than they had from above. Perhaps it was because on the upper level the immensity of the great plain shrank their proportions by comparison to something less than their real size. Now, the plain no longer visible, they rose up in unobstructed grandeur, ramparts that cut her off, if only for a little while, from the great loneliness lying in wait beyond.

"Why don't more people live down here?" she said after a while. "It's so quiet, away from the wind. And there are trees—big trees—and grass and flowers."

"Do you think Jim would like it?"

No, Jim wouldn't like it. Even the hills of Ireland, if he had been among them for more than a day or two, oppressed him. And the hills of Ireland didn't cut you off from the world like these great walls. There was always room between them so that you could see something of what lay beyond. You could see for miles up and down the valley, of course; but, perhaps because the view was extended narrowly in two directions, the walls seemed to crowd in all the closer. The horizon was near at hand, the sky cut by the high-reaching walls to dimensions which were insignificant by comparison with the tremendous concavity of blue above the plains. But Norah did not tell Malory what she was thinking. She no longer resented his efforts to isolate her, to draw her to his side, but she

was not yet ready to acknowledge her accord. She drew her feet from the water and moved back beside him.

"Why did you leave Ireland?" she said.

He did not answer at once. He sat up and taking a pen-knife from his pocket cleaned his pipe with unnecessary care. He's stalling for time, Norah thought. Trying to make up his answer.

But his words were disappointingly prosaic. "Wanderlust, I suppose," he said. "After the family broke up there wasn't much to hold me."

"Not even Ireland?"

"Ireland least of all. A country is more than hills and valleys and rivers, Norah."

"Do people really matter so much?" she said, thinking again of Jim's words, "people aren't everything."

Malory did not answer her directly. He refilled his pipe, tamped down the tobacco and put the pipe in his pocket. "When I was a boy I worshipped Michael Collins. I saw him twice—the first time when he was speaking at a big meeting outside Dublin, just before the rebellion of '16. The police broke the meeting up but not before Collins had finished. The second time he was hiding from the English."

"Where was he hiding?"

Malory ignored her question. "He was my hero, Norah. When his own people killed him I lost faith in Ireland."

Norah was silent, thinking about Michael Collins. She had been a very small girl when he had died, four or five at the most. But she could remember Aunt Lucy saying across the table to her father, "Set a traitor to kill a traitor. This at least they cannot blame on us." She did not think now that her father had said anything at all, only sat there and stared straight ahead of him with no expression in his pale rheumy eyes. She was glad now that he had not spoken; she liked to think that in his heart he disagreed with Aunt Lucy.

She stretched her arms above her head, knowing that the movement lifted her breasts into clear high outline, and fingered the soft grass. Lying at full length she felt relaxed, almost drowsy. She looked at Malory through half-closed lids. "And now?" she said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "We grow up, Norah. I sometimes think that nobody should live beyond the age of eighteen. Your faith doesn't change maybe, but it grows dim with time. I'd go back if I could. But no doubt it's as well I can't. A good thing to escape the last disillusionment."

"Why can't you go back?"

Again he evaded her question, and stared across the river with eyes that seemed to see nothing. Norah did not care. He was not a handsome man, she thought, looking at his thin dark face; his features were much too irregular and there was a kind of petulant arrogance in the expression which she had come to consider characteristic of him. No, not a handsome face—ugly really—and not a young face. Why, he must be over forty, to have seen Michael Collins before the rebellion of '16. But a face that held you just the same, a face that was alive with something more than the obvious animation of the curious or alert. It was alive with experience; his history had recorded itself there; it was the face of a man memory-haunted, whose past had cut deep. And feeling that she understood him the resentment she had once felt in his presence slipped entirely away, a thing too trivial to be nurtured any longer.

So that, when he turned and bent his head and kissed her very deliberately on the mouth she made no move, least of all of surprise. Only when his hands gripped her shoulders so hard that the pain shocked her did she cry out; but his grip did not relax. She lay passive, afraid only because of her awareness that it cost her an effort not to return his kiss.

He loosened his grip at last and slipping an arm around her shoulders lifted her to a sitting position. "I'm sorry, Norah," he said. "Forgive me."

She looked at him without expression. "Why do you say that?"

"I made a mistake. I thought . . ."

He broke off and got quickly to his feet. "We'd better go back," he said. "Jim will be anxious about you."

"Why should he be? He knows I'm with you."

It gave her a fine exultant sense of power to see the red appear in his face. "I didn't deserve that, Norah."

She stood up then and brushed the grass from her skirt with slow deliberate motions. "Why did you kiss me?"

"Because you're beautiful, Norah. I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. More lovely than the pale stars . . ."

"That's Yeats," she said.

"Only a poet can say how beautiful you are."

She moved closer to him, smiling into his troubled face. "As lovely as Gail Anderson?" she said.

He turned his back on her and she felt a quick thrill of triumph. "As lovely as Gail Anderson?" she repeated.

"You're different," was all he said.

They were quiet on the way back. But Norah's mind was stirred to characteristic introspection. Was she a wanton because she had not resented his kiss? She did not know, for she could not reflect on her emotions except in a negative way. What she had actually felt she did not for the moment consider. She had, she believed, behaved in a civilized manner—no outraged school-girl protests, no patent display of anger. Only an unresisting unresponsive acceptance which had disarmed and humiliated him. But she did not really want him to feel humiliated. Just before they reached the sports ground she gently touched his arm.

"It's been a grand afternoon, Brian," she said. "I enjoyed every minute of it."

He glanced at her quickly, his eyes alert, questioning. "You mean that?"

She withdrew her hand. "They're still playing baseball," she said. "Jim won't have missed me at all."

CHAPTER 5

IT WAS STRANGE THAT RAIN COULD MATTER SO MUCH. RAIN WHICH Norah had always taken for granted, an immutable part of things which made no difference in a way of life. Not over the years anyway, although at Innishcoolín the farmers sometimes had had trouble getting in the hay. And once some of the jaunty haycocks dotting Uncle James' meadow-land had rotted, even under their carefully shaped little caps of long twisted grass, held down by lengths of stout wood. But there the rain hadn't been anything to talk about. From the beginning of time, when the hills of Innishcoolín had first risen from the earth's upheaval, the rain had fallen on them, sometimes gently, sometimes driven by lashing winds that came over the mountains from the sea. And the generations of men that reached back two thousand years had shaped their way of life in harmony with all except its most extravagant vagaries. So it was that they did not regard the rain, nor the sun which shared with it almost equal dominance over the days of the years, as topics of conversation. Rain and sunlight had always been; a little more of one, a little less of the other, made no difference.

But on the prairie people talked about the weather all the time. Especially the rain. They had grown so accustomed to watching the sky that every cloud had for them a meaning not revealed to the alien; and even when there were no clouds at all they could tell by the sound the wind made cutting through telephone wires, the whistle of a distant train, the behaviour of birds and beasts, by some indefinable quality in the atmosphere itself which they could not describe, whether rain was likely to come. Whenever two men met, on road or street or field, for a minute or an hour, the magic word was instantly on their lips. And now, Norah thought to herself as she

took an apple pie from the oven and set it carefully on a metal rack on the kitchen table, they'd talk about it more than ever—for a week anyway. For it had rained the night before, not gently or for long as it had that day in spring when she had walked by herself to the Anderson house, but with frightening savage intensity from a black sky split open every second by flashes of lightning that leapt from heaven to earth in quivering jagged lines; each flash, in the brief moment between birth and extinction, alive with malignant irresistible power. She and Jim had gone to bed early last night, but in darkness unusual for the hour, because clouds had piled up in the west to blot out the twilight. They were tired but they had not slept, for Jim was nervous and something of his tension communicated itself to Norah. So they had lain awake for a short time in the midst of an unnatural foreboding quietness.

But soon they were listening to a fantastic cacaphony of sounds: the thunder that had swelled from a distant mutter into a continuous rumble like a bass crescendo played on a great pipe-organ; the wind roaring across endless miles of level plain, hardly distinguishable in actual sound from the thunder, but in its strength creating alien subsidiary noises which in the brief pauses between thunder-claps struck the ear with the nerve-twisting force of unexpected grotesque discords—noises like the banging of the screen-door of the kitchen which they had forgotten to latch, the rattling of an empty oil-drum as it rolled across the yard and into an outbuilding, the sharp metallic crack of a dry branch broken off in the hedge below the window, the almost human groans of the roof as the wind swept under the eaves and struggled upwards to escape.

When the rain began it sounded loud and hard on the roof, even when you made allowance for the wind lashing it so fiercely that it must have been carried against the house in lines almost horizontal. For a minute Jim had lain rigid, his arms straight by his sides, and though Norah could hear little for the noise of the wind and thunder she knew that he was hardly breathing. She whispered his name and lay close to him, but he did not relax. But soon the sharp crackling sound on the roof changed to a steady monotonous drum-beat and Jim breathed again.

"There was a little hail at first," he said. "Just enough to scare the daylight out of you. It's all right now."

But he had not gone to sleep until the rain was over. "I hate to miss any of it," he explained to Norah. "There's no sound like it on earth. And we don't hear it very often."

Perhaps the rain would mean as much to her one day. Already she could understand why everyone wanted it so much, for this morning the withered grass about the house was faintly tinged with the green of renewed life, and across the plains the colours stood out in almost bold relief, the obliterating dust which had subdued everything it touched almost to a common shade of dull grey-brown having been washed clean away. The prairie was like an oil-painting of some old master brought out of a centuries-old hiding place and through the art of the chemist restored to its original brightness, every line, every detail clearly visible to the most indifferent glance.

The air blowing through the open windows of the kitchen was fresh and cool. There was a cleanness in it that she had not felt for many days. It was good to be able to breathe without the dust tickling your nostrils. But though she knew what the rain meant, and by merely looking out of the window could see the visible evidences of its power, she didn't feel about it the way Jim and the neighbours did. Not yet, anyway. The rain held their love and their hate. It was to them a living force, a power which, however far in advance its coming might be foretold by the meteorologist, came vested with the magic of a visitation. It was the power which could make or break them, a power whose awfulness lay in the fact of its being forever beyond their bidding or dismissal. The rain was to them the visible embodiment of godhood. And in the manner of the ancient deities—of whom even the names were in this new land unknown or forgotten—it bestowed or withheld its blessings, not in accordance with the terms of some pre-conceived cosmic plan, but at the dictates of supernal caprice. Jim had said that there were no little folk in the West, and no gods. He was wrong about the gods.

Norah emptied a batch of cookies on to a sheet of brown paper and looked at them with satisfaction. Phillip would like one, with a glass of milk. She glanced idly out of the window to see if he was still playing in the mud-puddle at the head of the garden. But he

was not in sight and she went outside to call him. She saw him at once, in the yard with Jim. They were near the gate, watching an ancient car chug up the trail which wound across the fields from the west road-allowance. Jim opened the gate. The car jerked violently through and sputtered to a standstill.

Norah looked with mild curiosity at the man who stepped from the car through the opening where once a door had been. She could not see his features at that distance, but she knew at once he was a stranger to her. But that isn't surprising, she said to herself; everyone around here is. And she remembered with wry amusement Jim's assurance made long ago when they had lain together on the slopes of Cave Hill: "You'll make more friends over there in a month than you'd make anywhere else in a lifetime." So far she hadn't made any friends, unless you counted Brian Malory and Gail Anderson. But you counted as friends only the people with whom you felt half-way intimate, the people with whom you could share confidences when the need of sharing was strong. She didn't feel that way about Brian or Gail. Not Gail anyway. Perhaps, though, the fault was in herself. Up till the present she hadn't felt the need of people very much. But self-sufficiency in the old land was one thing; here on the prairies it was another. Here you could never make friends with the land itself. It was too vast, too lonely. It repelled advances.

The little group at the gate moved towards the house. "Jim's bringing him in," Norah said aloud, and she was pleased because this morning she wanted to talk to someone. She would offer the visitor coffee and some of the fresh-baked cookies for a morning snack, and there was plenty in the house if he should stay for dinner.

"Norah," Jim said, "this is Weary Rivers. He farms four miles west, near Brian's place. Weary, this is Norah."

Weary Rivers took off his sweat-stained ragged straw hat and bowed in embarrassed acknowledgement of the introduction. He was small and abnormally thin; and his faded blue jeans, precariously suspended from a worn and frayed strip of canvas belting, hung about his legs in folds like a flag at half-mast. His face, like his body, was lean and dejected; his eyes a watery pale blue preternaturally large behind the faint fringes of light-coloured down which bordered his eyelids.

Rocking back and forth on his heels in a series of strange spasmodic convulsions, his Adam's apple moving up and down to synchronize with the motion of his body, he looked like some prehistoric bird suddenly alighted in the middle of the prairie, whose bewilderment and fear are reflected in movement and expression.

"Pleased to meet you, Ma'm," Weary said. "Mighty pleased. Figger everybody's tickled to get a gander at what Jim here picked up."

He blushed violently, from receding chin to pale blue eyes it seemed to Norah, and loudly cleared his throat. The next move was not his responsibility; he had tossed the conversational ball to Norah. But the act of clearing his throat indicated that he was thinking ahead. He might have to speak again, and he was holding himself in readiness for the eventuality.

"Won't you come in?" Norah said. "I can make coffee in a minute. And there are fresh cookies."

"No thank you, Ma'm," Weary said, speaking now with the confidence which sometimes comes to the otherwise tongue-tied when they have concrete issues to deal with. "Much and all as I'd like to sample your cookin'. Way Jim looks, it must be all right. But I'm sort of playin' Paul Revere this mornin' so I got to hustle. I just figgered you folks ought to know 'long with the rest of 'em."

"Know what?" Norah said, mystified.

"There's a looney jumped the coop over to the asylum. They say he's headin' this way. I figger Central would have called everybody, only the line's down six different places. Storm. They told it over the radio this mornin' but I figgered a lot of people would be sleepin' in on account of the storm and mightn't have heard."

"Is the man dangerous?" Norah asked.

"They didn't say. A police warnin' it was, though. Said to be on the look-out and notify 'em if they saw anyone. Tall feller in overalls. 'Bout forty, they said. They said some other things about him I forget."

"He wouldn't be dangerous," Jim said. "They're not sent here."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that," Weary disagreed mildly. "You never can tell about looneys. One minute they're like butter wouldn't melt in their mouth. The next they jump you."

He broke off suddenly, overwhelmed by his own eloquence. He lifted his hat again, revealing a totally bald head, and quickly replaced it. "G'bye, Ma'm," he mumbled. "Sure pleased to have met you."

He shuffled off across the yard to his car, climbed in and drove off in a cloud of blue smoke. Norah, shaking with silent laughter, watched him out of sight.

"Oh, Jim," she said. "What a funny, funny, little man. Like something out of Dickens!"

Jim's face was serious. "Weary's all right," he said.

Norah sobered instantly, "I'm sure he is," she said. "But Jim, you're used to him. I mean—I've seen him for the first time . . ."

"I know," Jim said. "He's a caricature, I admit. I feel sorry for the poor devil."

"Tell me, Jim."

Jim shook his head. "There isn't much to tell. Weary's been a drifter most of his life, I guess. He came here during the depression and bought a quarter for next to nothing. He's been here ever since. Lives in a one-room shack with a couple of dogs and about two dozen cats. Brian Malory keeps an eye on him. Weary's the kind of guy you'll find almost anywhere—do anything for his friends but he's not much help to himself."

"But why are you sorry for him?" Norah said. "Maybe he's happy."

Jim looked at her rather queerly. "You ask tough questions sometimes, Norah. Maybe he is."

Suddenly he began to laugh. "I'll bet he looked you over pretty thoroughly. He's a connoisseur of women, Weary is. Reads all the movie magazines and nothing else. His walls are papered with pin-up girls."

He sobered again, almost at once. "Funny thing about the West. When people go to seed they go all the way. There doesn't seem to be room for compromises here."

"I don't know about Weary," Norah said. "I've just met him. But I don't think he's gone all the way—yet. There's something about that shrivelled little face of his that makes me think you could depend on him—even now—if you were in a spot."

She spoke the last words self-consciously, savouring their newness

Jim patted her lightly on the shoulder. "You talk more like one of us every day," he said.

She did not know what to say to him then, did not know whether to be pleased or regretful. She spoke quickly. "Why not, Jim? I'm a part of you, aren't I?" And she kissed him quickly and went back to the house.

She did not think very much about the man who had escaped from the asylum in the big town the other side of Twin Buttes. She had seen the asylum from a distance once, when Jim had taken her for a long drive on a Sunday afternoon—a great grey stone building standing in the middle of a lonely stretch of prairie on the outskirts of the town. She had wondered then what it would be like to be cut off from the world, not because you had consciously done anything wrong, or behaved in a way which should have attracted anyone's attention, but only because other people—foolish people—didn't think the way you did. It would be all right, she supposed, if the severance was so complete that you really wanted to get away from people whom you knew were mad, who had no meaning for you any longer. But the person who was only a little, or only periodically, out of mental step with his fellow-men must suffer the torments of the damned. Always to be struggling against the barrier which you hadn't raised yourself, to be groping in a kind of wild desperate anguish, guided only by the words of the psychiatrist who might or might not be able to make contact with the thing which was yourself, your soul, for the clue to the catastrophe which had cut you off from a world to which you felt you still belonged! Last night someone had taken the easy direct way back. He had rejoined the world without so much as a by-your-leave to the authorities. But things would not be any better knowing that you were suspect, that every man's hand, however gentle, was reaching out to catch you and take you back to the grey stone prison house. She would not be afraid if she met the escaped man face to face. None of the inmates of the asylum, so Jim had said, was dangerous. It might be rather interesting to meet him, for she had never talked to a madman before.

At dinner-time Jim told her that he was going to finish some late summer fallowing on the south-east quarter of the farm, a mile or more from the house. "I don't suppose you'll be afraid to be left

alone for the afternoon," he said facetiously. "But if you get nervous you and the kid might come out to the field, say about three o'clock. You might bring a pail of tea and a few sandwiches with you. And if I should happen to leave a piece of this pie you could bring it along too."

"At three o'clock," Norah said firmly, "Phillip will be asleep and I'll be entertaining the madman in the kitchen. *He'll* get the piece of pie."

When Jim went off on the tractor, Phillip riding for a short way on his knee and holding the wheel, Norah watched him go tranquilly. The rain had brought with it an accompanying lightness of spirit so that she found it impossible to feel concerned about anything at all. Later, when Phillip was asleep, she carried an old deck-chair she had found in the shed around to the shady side of the house and dozed there, a magazine lying unopened on her lap, lulled almost to sleep by the drone of the great bumble bees in the little patch of wild clover at the top of the garden, and the soft rustle of the wind in the overgrown poplar hedges. Presently, when Phillip woke up, she would pack an afternoon lunch and they would carry it across the fields to Jim. Now it was pleasant to relax, to forget the petty details of everyday routine, to drift off into a state of semi-unconsciousness in which deliberately invoked images brought with them sensations of exotic and illicit delights, images in which Jim and Brian Malory struggled indeterminately for mastery.

A footfall faintly sounded behind her in the grass and Norah started up. "Oh, excuse me, Miss Anderson," she said confusedly. "I was half asleep and I—I thought . . ."

"That I was the lunatic-at-large?" Gail laughed. "Perhaps you're not so far wrong."

"I'm glad you came," Norah said. "Not because I'm afraid, but . . ."

She hesitated, fumbling for the right word. She wanted to tell Gail that she was glad to see her for her own sake, but she did not want to say so baldly.

"I'm a free agent on Saturdays," Gail said. "It's a wonderful afternoon for a walk. I ran into Jim and he told me you were alone. I thought that under the circumstances you wouldn't mind company."

Her words were chillingly matter-of-fact. She was saying that she had not come of her own volition but at Jim's suggestion. Was she always going to hold the door half-open and then, just when you thought she was inviting you to come in, slam it shut in your face?

"Really, you shouldn't have bothered," Norah said a trifle stiffly. "I'm quite all right. I don't mind being alone. But it was good of you to come."

There were no more deck-chairs, and the ground was still damp from the over-night rain. "We'd better go inside," Norah said. "Phillip will be waking up soon."

The living-room was cool, and for the first time in days Norah let up the blinds. Gail sat down on the chesterfield and looked about her with frank curiosity. "I'm sorry I haven't been over before this," she said. "But the last few weeks of school are always hectic. A few more days though . . ."

She swung her legs up on the chesterfield and leaned back against a cushion at the end. "Do you mind?" she said, kicking off her shoes. "My feet hurt."

She's like a great cat, Norah thought—green eyes, sleek body. But she said conventionally as she offered Gail a cigarette, "You'll be off on your holidays soon?"

"I suppose so," Gail said without interest. "Up north to the lakes, perhaps, where I'll sit around in a bathing-suit, eaten by the black-flies, propositioned by the wolves."

Norah risked a remark which was really a question—a question she did not like to ask directly. "I've wondered sometimes why you stay here, Gail," she said, using for the first time Gail's Christian name. "There's such a shortage of teachers I should have thought you'd have no trouble getting a position in the city."

The words sounded stilted, artificial, as if she were trying hard to make conversation. If only she could somehow escape this senseless exchange of banalities, break down the barrier, find again and for good the real woman whom she had seen for a fleeting moment that day in the big house!

Gail smiled almost absently. "Four years in the C.W.A.C.'s was excitement enough for a while. But you're quite right, Norah. It was

a mistake to come back. But you have to find things out for yourself. The trouble is there are so few people you meet in a lifetime who mean anything to you. You don't want to let them go."

Then abruptly, as if she was shying away from an uncomfortable topic, "I like your house, Norah."

Norah looked at the over-stuffed living-room furniture with sensations of vague distaste. "It will be nicer later on," she said. "If we get a crop, that is." Often now she found herself qualifying statements with the propitiatory clichés of the community. "I want a rug—a real rug that your feet go away down in—and drapes, and some good pictures. And Jim will make book-shelves as soon as the harvest is over. There's nothing like books to furnish a room. Jim has a trunkful upstairs but we've no place to put them. And some time I want a piano, and a good record player."

She stopped then because she felt that she was talking indiscreetly, expressing dissatisfaction which she did not really feel. But Gail nodded her head understandingly. "Mrs. McKinley goes in for things that hit you in the eye all right," she said. "She had Jim talked into buying most of this stuff before I could head him off. But the furniture doesn't matter so much. It's the feel of the place."

Norah did not say anything more about her plans for the future, but she was pleased. Pleased because Gail was sensitive to atmosphere rather than outward appearance, and had found in her home something to approve. And her pleasure was hardly marred by the vague doubt lurking in the back of her mind. What was there—what had there been—between Gail Anderson and Jim? She did not heed very much the local gossip which hinted that Brian Malory was in love with Gail. Brian did not speak of her as a lover would, nor could she imagine that had Brian been interested Gail would have rejected him. But she had a feeling about Gail and Jim. The neighbours, she was sure, had expected them to marry. And why had Gail come back? Looking at Gail now, at the strong hard face, the scarlet mouth—had Jim ever kissed it?—she felt that Gail would recognize no barriers. If she wanted Jim she would fight for him, even yet. And the words "Before I could head him off" seemed to betoken some sort of communion between them, which, however

casually the words were spoken, might be indicative of something far more significant than the surface meaning suggested.

And yet, what did it matter now? Jim was her man and he loved her. She was sure of that. Only, paradoxically, in a community as wide and lonely as Twin Buttes, people were thrown close together. No man an island, she thought, going upstairs in answer to Phillip's shrill call. Not even Gail. And not herself or Brian Malory. Now, for the first time with a little sense of guilt, she remembered Brian's kiss. "I should worry about me," she told Phillip. "Not Jim."

This brave new world was too big, too unfriendly. It drove you in on a few people, on yourself. "We think too much," Gail said, holding Phillip on her knee so that he could finger the fine gold chain about her neck. "Or maybe not enough. Anyway, we imagine things. All kinds of things. And too much imagination can plague you like nothing on earth."

The words, in relation to anything hitherto spoken, were irrelevant. It was odd, though, how Gail seemed to sense what Norah was thinking. That day at the old house, for instance. And now words which on the surface were no more than an idle truism seemed to Norah to suggest some kind of warning. I'm transparent, she thought, everyone knows how my mind works. To Gail she said, "I'll make tea. Afterwards if you don't mind we'll take some out to Jim. He'll be working late."

Gail shook her head. "I'd like some tea, thanks," she said. "But I must go straight home afterwards."

Norah went out to the kitchen, stirred up the fire and set the kettle on the stove. She was disappointed that Gail could not go with her when she took tea out to Jim. Disappointed and relieved. She wanted to see Jim and Gail together, wanted to watch their faces while pretending to be busy with the tea things. She had seen them together only once before, when all impressions had been blurred and unreal. Now she would have been able to observe them with clear undistracted faculties. But she might have seen things—gestures, facial expressions momentarily unguarded—which would have been more disturbing than anything petty speculation could conjure up. Perhaps it was as well that Gail was going home directly after tea.

The man must have come in very quietly. He was sitting on a chair in the corner of the kitchen and she did not see him until she turned around. She did not start or cry out. Afterwards she remembered very clearly that she had made no sound. The man moved ever so little on the chair and spoke.

"I'm hungry," he said. "I haven't had anything to eat for a long time."

He stood up then and she saw that he was slight and stooped. His arms hung straight down by his sides and his hands were large and restless. But the face comforted her; it was thin and gentle and very old, though the hair above it was jet black.

"Why, of course," she said, and to her surprise her voice was calm. "I've just put the kettle on. Please sit down. I'll have something ready for you right away."

"That's very kind of you." And he added, hesitantly, "But I have no money. No money at all."

"It makes no difference," Norah said quickly. "Don't worry about it, please."

She spread a checked gingham cloth on the table with hands that shook only a little. All the time she was wondering how she could let Gail know, for she had closed the door leading to the living-room and she did not want to do anything which might disturb the intruder. The important thing was to be completely natural. Above all—she had read this somewhere—to avoid the unexpected in action, word or gesture.

The man had sat down again and was as quiet as before; but wherever she moved she fancied his eyes followed her, as if they had a separate mobile existence apart from his body. She could not be sure, because she did not want to look directly at him, but it seemed that he had moved his chair away from the wall, that he was imperceptibly inching his way towards her. But she mustn't let her imagination play tricks; the man couldn't possibly be a menace. He was nervous and ill at ease, and under the circumstances that was natural. Hungry too. But she wanted to look straight at him, to see if he had really moved. She picked up a package of cigarettes which lay open on the shelf above the work-table and held it out to him.

"Would you like to smoke?" she said.

He took a cigarette, fumbling a bit with long nervous fingers. Norah struck a match on the stove and was pleased that she was able to hold it so that the flame did not waver. After all, she had had a shock. It was not every woman who would be so composed after finding a strange man in the kitchen.

He lit the cigarette from the match she held out to him and inhaled deeply. "That's good," he said. He leaned back in the chair, his body almost at ease. Norah set a loaf of bread and the remnant of a roast on the table. He could cut as much beef for himself as he wanted, and there was pie to follow. She almost laughed aloud as she recalled her words to Jim at dinner-time: "I'll be entertaining the madman in the kitchen. *He*'ll get the piece of pie."

Well, he was going to get it. But first, bread, butter, pickles, beef. Suddenly she thought of those long nervous fingers tight around the handle of the carving knife, and she removed the roast from the table and cutting off several slices of beef placed them on a plate. All the time she was thinking, he's not dangerous but there's no sense putting temptation in his way.

She must communicate somehow with Gail. The easy thing, the natural thing would be to open the living-room door and call her on some pretext or other. But she could think of no excuse that would be entirely plausible. Besides, she did not want to raise her voice. The slightest variation in tone might be just enough to disturb the silent man in the corner.

Unexpectedly the difficulty resolved itself without her participation. The door between kitchen and living-room swung open and Phillip ran in. "Cookie, Mummy," he cried. "Cookie, please."

He stopped short at sight of the stranger. "Who's that man?" he demanded loudly.

The man in the corner seemed to stiffen. He held his cigarette half-way to his mouth between fingers that made no movement. Norah, looking at him, was afraid. "A visitor who has dropped in for a cup of tea," she said. In spite of all she could do her voice shook. "Here's your cookie and a nice cup of milk."

But Phillip did not move. He stood in the middle of the kitchen floor smiling at the stranger. The stranger smiled back in a strained sort of way as if he had not smiled for a long time. Norah wanted

to speak then, to say something, anything, but she could think of no words at all. Then she saw out of the corner of her eye Gail Anderson standing in the doorway between kitchen and living-room, and relief so exquisite flooded her whole being that she laughed out loud in sheer exultation. "We have a visitor, Gail," she said. "I'm getting him something to eat."

She tried to catch Gail's eye but Gail was looking at the man in the corner. He had risen to his feet again, shambling, hesitant, plainly ill at ease.

"Hello," Gail said quietly. "Isn't it a marvellous day?"

The man nodded slowly. For a minute he did not speak. He seemed to be mulling over in his mind what Gail had said, preparing his answer before putting it into words. "I think it's the loveliest day I've ever seen," he said at last, speaking with grave conviction. But his body did not relax and he kept his eyes fixed on the floor. Again Norah felt a quick cold thrill of fear and pushed the carving-knife back into the kitchen drawer as far as it would go, knowing as she did so both comfort and shame.

Gail sat down by the table and lit a cigarette. The man was looking at her now instead of the floor, and it seemed to Norah that his body was not quite so tense. "Please sit down," Gail said. "You must be tired."

The man sat down. His cigarette had gone out and he relit it from a match which Gail tossed him. "It's a good day for walking," he said.

"I like walking," Gail said. "People say there isn't anything to see on a walk in this country. But they're wrong. It's only the people who like the obvious who talk that way, don't you think?"

Gail was taking the madman into her confidence, making him at home by seeming to ask his opinion seriously. Norah admired the way Gail carried things off and felt only a little envious. She finished putting things on the table—cutlery, salt and pepper shakers, a dish of pickles—all the time listening to what Gail and the stranger were saying. They were talking about schools now, and Gail sounded eager, animated. But it was the stranger's voice which held Norah's attention.

"I taught school myself once," he said. "For ten years. But that was a long time ago. I liked it. I like kids."

"They can be little devils," Gail said. "But at least they're alive."

The man did not seem to be listening any more. "I liked the kids in my school a lot," he went on, and he was talking to himself now and not anyone else in the room. "And they liked me. We got along fine together—until people started telling lies about me." His voice was rising and there were queer lights in his dark deep-set eyes.

"I know what you mean," Gail said. "There's gossip in every school district—so many old haridans who ought to be muzzled. And talk like that is hard to ignore sometimes, especially if you're a bit sensitive. But you have to ignore it if you're going to survive."

She was talking rapidly now, trying hard to break through the barrier which the man had thrown up between them, the barrier behind which he was hiding himself without knowing what he had done. There was a forced note in Gail's voice as if she knew that things were slipping out of her control; and Norah felt again the quick clutch of fear at her heart. Swiftly she intervened, coming to Gail's aid.

"Lunch is ready," she said. "Please bring your chair over. I suppose you're like all Westerners, you like your tea with your meal?"

She knew that the man did not hear her. He was far away, beyond reach of her voice. "Something happened," he said. "One of the girls—a big girl in Grade Eight—got into trouble. They blamed me. But I never touched her—never looked at her—that way."

His head was bowed now as if weighted down by the shame of recollection. "They couldn't prove anything. But you know how a thing like that sticks. Everybody laughed at me—even if they didn't believe it—and told lies. I had to do something. One day . . ."

He broke off and lifted his head. His eyes were strangely luminous. "But I was a good teacher. I got along fine. Until they started to tell lies about me."

Norah wanted to feel only pity for him. Because he was deserving of it—a pathetic lost soul, baffled by the evil lying close to the surface in the lives of all men, evil which finds release in a thousand

ways, this time in blatant, ill-founded scandal. But in spite of her impulse to sympathy she was still fearful, for she remembered strange tales which she had heard in different forms a hundred times: tales of good men, honest men, goaded beyond endurance and suddenly going berserk; of a latent primitive blood-lust asserting itself with unexpectedness wholly appalling in men who before had seemed only meek and gentle and good. The light in the stranger's eyes bothered her, and his hands had begun to twitch again. Was he reliving in some recess of distorted memory a fantastic and incredible deed, an act of violence and of blood which whether real or illusory was at once a torment and a solace in that spiritual exile ordained by society for such as he? There was the old shop-keeper at Innishcoolín—McBride his name was—who kept the shop at the end of the lane where Uncle James had sometimes bought Norah taffy. Old McBride, who for forty years or more had lived at peace with his neighbours and his nagging wife. He had gone to church twice every Sunday, given credit to the needy in times of hardship, and performed a thousand unheralded acts of charity and love. But one morning he rose up early and shot his nagging wife to death as she lay in bed. The law had declared him insane and he had vanished within the walls of the county asylum to wither imperceptibly away into nothingness of very old age. But he went unrepentant. He loved God, and his wife was an evil thing. At God's bidding he had stamped the evil out. He went unrepentant and glad, knowing that his reward was sure. He had laughed at the ignorance of a world that falsely accused him of sin and wanted no part in it any more.

"I had to do something," the man repeated. His body was rigid again, all except the twitching hands.

Once more Norah spoke. "Will you please bring your chair over?" she said, a little more loudly this time, though she feared to raise her voice.

Phillip finished his cookie and set his cup on the table with a loud bang. He wiped his mouth with a grubby paw and moved closer to the stranger. "Hi!" he said, and grinned.

The man smiled back. There was something in the smile, a quality Norah had never seen in a human face before, that caused her flesh to rise on her bare arms in chill goose-pimples. Then suddenly

those twitching hands shot forward, sure of themselves at last, and caught Phillip in their grip. Norah screamed, high and shrill, and dropping the plate she held in her hands threw herself upon the madman and fought with him for her child.

He let Phillip go when she struck at his face. His eyes, wild and desperate, blazed a moment close to her own, then his long powerful arms were around her and she was helpless, caught in a death-hug. He was crushing the life out of her. She could not breathe—could not see anything except Gail's horrified face somewhere in the background. Then the light went out and the sound of Phillip's wailing ceased; and there was darkness all about her. Darkness and silence and nothing at all besides.

Norah came back to life a long time afterwards. Or so it seemed, for the things she remembered at first had happened far back in her past, so that her return to the present was not instantaneous, but in the manner of a progression through half-forgotten yesterdays. For a while she was content to wander about Innishcoolín with Uncle James, wondering if Jim would come that day and what he would say to her and she to him when he came. But she lost her hold on Innishcoolín, although she let go reluctantly for it was safe and peaceful there, and journeying far with her small child saw first the wide sweep of grey ocean and then the land henceforth to be her home, and between land and ocean there was hardly any difference at all. And then she remembered Gail Anderson and the man in the kitchen, although at first they seemed far away and not really part of life. But they persisted in drawing close to her although she did not want them to come because she associated them with unpleasant things. They were very close to her now, and she remembered all that had happened and, lay quiet with her eyes tightly closed, because she was afraid. She was aware of sounds, too, sounds near at hand—people talking and footsteps on the floor, and then a familiar voice in her ear. She opened her eyes at last and looked up into Jim's anxious face. She tried to smile, but the fear prevented her.

"Feeling better now?" he said.

Because his concern was so patently for her she dared to ask the question which was on her lips. "Phillip?"

"Eating cookies in the kitchen."

The relief was so sudden and overwhelming that she nearly fainted again. She fought off the weakness and struggled to sit up. Jim commanded her to lie still and she obeyed him. "I'll get you some water," he said, and went away. There was a glass on the floor beside the chesterfield but someone had upset it and the water had run across the linoleum rug and formed a little pool under the window at the far side of the room. The sunlight coming through another window caught it, and the little pool reflected the sunlight onto the wall like a mirror.

Jim came back almost at once and she drank the water eagerly. She could clearly hear voices in the kitchen and wondered who was there. She tried again to sit up, and this time Jim encouraged her, putting an arm around her shoulders and supporting her while she swung her feet over the edge of the chesterfield and sat very still until the room stopped spinning crazily before her eyes. When Phillip ran into the room, wide-eyed with excitement, she held out her arms to him and hugged him tight. "Oh, darling, darling!" she sobbed. "If anything had happened to you!"

"Mummy, Mummy!" Phillip cried, "there's a real policeman in the kitchen!"

Jim laughed, not very happily, for he was bewildered and concerned. "There wasn't anything that *could* happen," he said. "But I guess you didn't know."

"That he wasn't dangerous? I knew that, Jim. You told me yourself. But I forgot."

She was beginning to feel ashamed. She got to her feet, slowly, for the room was not still even yet, and walked into the kitchen. Jim followed close behind. The madman was sitting at the table across from a newcomer in policeman's uniform. They were both eating silently of the food in front of them. Gail Anderson was at the stove, refilling tea-cups. She looked around and smiled at Norah. "Feeling better now?"

Norah smiled back and nodded. The madman—somehow that was the only way she could think of him—lifted his head. He looked confused and there was vague apprehension in his eyes. "I'm sorry I upset you," he said. "I didn't mean to. The little boy looked as if he wanted to play, so I thought . . . I really *like* children."

Norah had to fight hard to keep back her tears. "It was my fault entirely," she said. "It was just that . . . that . . ."

She broke off and began to cut unneeded slices of bread. There was no use trying to explain anything now. She had let her imagination run away with her. She had lost her nerve completely, behaved like an hysterical school-girl. And with Gail Anderson looking on. That was the worst thing of all.

The silent big policeman pushed back his plate and lit a cigarette. "We'd better be going now," he said to the man opposite him.

The other bowed his head ever so slightly. "That will be all right," he said. "I'm tired."

He stood up then and held out his hand to Gail. "Good-bye, Miss Anderson," he said formally. "I'm very pleased to have met you."

"Good-bye, Mr. Laughlin," Gail said. "Good luck to you."

So Gail had found out his name. Found out his name and chatted with him and fed him while Norah lay unconscious, the victim of imagination's fantastic deceit. Now the man was looking at Norah and holding out his hand—a hand that would do no harm to any one. There was a look of furtive shame in his eyes which she would not be able to forget. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It was nothing—nothing at all. All my fault." And Norah capped her futile phrases with a blundering inanity. "I hope we'll see you again soon."

The man didn't seem to be listening to her. He was fumbling in the pocket of his threadbare jacket and presently he brought out a fat little silver pencil, very old it looked, with curious coloured glass inserts forming panels in the hexagonal sides. "I wish you'd give this to the little boy," he said hurriedly. "I loved it myself when I was his age. I've kept it safe all this time. You hold it up close to your eyes against the light and you can see some very pretty views in the coloured glass. Old Country mostly, except for one of Niagara Falls, Something like a miniature stereoscope, only in two dimensions."

She almost said, "We can't possibly take it," then changed her mind. For she knew in a flash of intuition that the giving of the pencil was on his part an act of atonement. He would not understand that the act of atonement should have been hers, not his. All he knew was that he had distressed her, that he had created a scene,

and in thus parting from something which he valued a great deal he was making peace with himself.

"Thank you very much," Norah said. "I know that Phillip will love it. But won't you please give it to him yourself?"

"I'd like to," he said. And Phillip came running at her call and shouted with delight when the man showed him how to look at the pretty pictures in the coloured glass. Nor did he, in his excitement, forget to say "Thank you," very politely, nor to shake hands with a dignity appropriate to such an important ritual as the giving of gifts.

And then they were gone—the big loose-jointed policeman who had spoken hardly a word in the past half-hour, and his ward with the thin tired face, whom he would now take back to the dreary grey stone building on the prairie. The gates would close behind the man they called mad and he would again be cut off from the world which, however much it had mistreated him, still held his affection. Norah, knowing that she had disturbed profoundly, had made unhappy the brief hour during which he had re-established tentative contact with the world he loved, a world which for the time had concentrated itself in the person of her own small son, felt that she had done an innocent fellow-creature an irreparable harm. Unwittingly, of course, but the result was the same as if she had acted with deliberate malice.

She was defenceless and ashamed. For she was alone with Jim and Gail now and there was nothing she could say to them to justify what she had done or failed to do in what she had mistakenly deemed a moment of crisis. It was not the mistake itself—though it in truth was bad enough—but her inability to meet the situation as her imagination conceived it which stirred in her the bitter sense of shame.

At least she would attempt no evasions. "I made a fool of myself," she said. "I was on edge. And when he reached for Phillip . . ."

She was sitting on the chesterfield while she talked, for her legs were still weak under her. Now Phillip ran to her, his face red with excitement. "Look, Mummy, look at the pictures!" Because she was glad of any distraction which would excuse her from further self-abasement she began to look at the pictures and explain them as best she could to the chattering little boy on her knee.

Unexpectedly Gail Anderson came to her aid. "If Phillip had been mine I'd have passed out too," she said. "But I hadn't anything to lose."

It surprised Norah that she should feel grateful to Gail. She had not expected that she ever would. But now Gail was on her side. She had said the only words which could possibly justify what Norah had done. And she spoke them sincerely, with no hint of sarcasm; rather, it seemed to Norah, a trace of regret because she had no one to faint for. Jim seemed content to accept Gail's explanation. He sat close to Norah on the chesterfield, an expression of anxious concern still in his eyes.

"Mitford—he's the cop—came along in his car when I was at the bottom of the field. He said that the looney had been reported heading this way. I thought I'd come along, just in case. Anyway, it was nearly tea-time."

"Poor Jim," Norah said. "You must have got a shock."

"Gail had things under control," Jim said, and in spite of herself, Norah flinched. "She and Laughlin had got you on to the couch with your heels up at one end and were slapping wet towels on your head. They turned you over to Mitford and me and Gail talked to Laughlin while we were waiting for you to come round. You took your time about it."

"How long?" Norah asked incuriously.

"You were out cold for all of ten minutes after we got here. Any longer and I'd have sent Mitford for the doctor. I was scared."

"It was a good thing you came," Norah said to Gail. "I don't know what would have happened if I'd been alone."

Gail laughed. "Laughlin's a gentleman. He was really terribly upset. He cried when he was carrying you in here. You'd have been all right."

Norah smiled weakly. "I should have known that all along. I did really. But somehow—with Phillip . . ."

Though she felt a little shame in doing so, she was glad to employ the excuse with which Gail had gratuitously provided her. For whatever Gail may have secretly thought, the excuse served to justify Norah in Jim's eyes. Just now nothing else mattered. "And he did talk rather oddly," she added. "About children. There was something abnormal . . ."

But she did not go on. She remembered the man's face, his tired haunted eyes. Any excuse was legitimate except one which condemned him.

They drove Gail home soon afterwards. Norah did not want to go, for her head ached and she felt tired all over. But she could not face an hour or more in the house by herself with only her thoughts—they were sure to be morbidly self-critical—for company. She and Gail sat in the back seat, Phillip as always in front with his father, and rode over the level road between level fields under the yellow light of the sun now falling towards the north-west. They talked idly of nothing that mattered, being especially careful to avoid any reference to what had happened that afternoon.

The farmhouse where Gail lived was a novelty in the community for it was low and rambling, like the ranch-houses Norah had seen in the movies; only it was built of lumber instead of logs. Gail had told Norah that the people living there, an elderly couple named Olafson, were relatives of her father's. "They're alone now and give me the run of the place, and two rooms to myself," she explained. "By comparison with most country school-teachers I live a privileged and affluent life."

Mrs. Olafson was at the door to meet them. She was tall and white-haired, a fine lady, Norah thought, with kindly lined face and faded blue eyes. She pressed them to come in, speaking with a strong Swedish accent, and Jim was inclined to, but Norah said no. She did not want to talk to anyone any more that day, and she made Phillip her excuse for going home at once. "He's tired," she explained apologetically. "By the time we get home it will be past his bed-time."

"You will come another day then?" Mrs. Olafson said anxiously, for she liked young people and saw them seldom. And Norah said they would come soon and smiled her approval when Mrs. Olafson gave Phillip a slice of sticky cake fresh from the oven to nurture him on the return journey.

On the way back Norah resolved to say nothing more about the day's catastrophe—for as such she thought of it. What had happened she would try to forget, hoping that Jim would forget too. But in spite of her resolution she thought of nothing else all the way home.

She yearned for an opportunity to redeem herself in the eyes of Jim and Gail Anderson. And, though she tried hard to banish it, the face of Brian Malory, gently mocking, was constantly before her. The three of them—Jim, Gail, Brian, the people who were closest to her—would have reason hereafter to look upon her as being at best a weakling. Jim accepted now the excuses which Gail had made on her behalf and which she had been quick to invoke, but for how long? How long would he respect her, a mother who had responded to a threat to her child's safety—for such she had supposed the madman's action to be—by fainting dead away? Gail Anderson knew the truth, though for the time being she had chosen to ignore it, and might use it for her own purposes. Almost certainly Gail would be the first to tell Brian Malory.

But perhaps, Norah thought, she would tell Brian herself. The telling would have in it something of the quality of moral courage sufficient almost to counteract the weakness which she would acknowledge. Then, having come to something like a resolution, she retreated for a while from reality and imagined herself performing some fine act of selfless heroism—rescuing Phillip from the river, for instance—which would restore her worth in her own and all men's eyes. But always, gnawing at the back of her mind, was the knowledge that she really did not want such an opportunity to arise.

She went to bed immediately after supper. When Jim had tucked Phillip away he came into the bedroom, lamp in hand. He placed the lamp carefully on the dresser and sat down on the bed.

"I'm sorry, darling," he said, kissing Norah's white face. "You've had a rotten time. You'll feel fine tomorrow."

He kissed her again, this time on the lips, and his kiss was warm and comforting. Norah slid her arms about his neck and held him tight.

"I can't get along without you, Jim," she said. "I need you close to me—all the time."

"I'll always be here, Norah. Whenever you want me."

She released her hold and looked up into his face. What she saw there reassured her.

"Of course, Jim," she said. "I'll be fine tomorrow."

CHAPTER 6

SHE WOULD TELL BRIAN HERSELF. SHE MADE UP HER MIND QUITE suddenly the next morning while she was washing the breakfast dishes. And she must talk to him at once. She was sure that he would understand, would know how to sooth her outraged spirit. The words that Gail had spoken in comfort seemed meaningless now. She and Jim had said the obvious things, the things anyone would say to reassure a person who had had a bad shock. Their words bore no relation to what they really felt about her behaviour. But Brian wouldn't say the obvious things. He would listen to her, alert, detached; when he pronounced judgment she would know at least a little of the truth about herself. But he must hear the story, the evidence for the defence, from her own lips.

She fretted impatiently while she finished the dishes and did the routine household chores. Her mind was made up, and she would not know peace again until she had seen Brian. But how to reach him? There was not much chance that he would come to the house, and if he did she would hardly be able to speak to him alone. But she must see him at once. And because there was no way open to satisfy the urgency in her she endured a morning of brooding misery. When Jim came in from the field at dinner-time he found her crying silently over the potatoes she was frying at the kitchen range.

Surprisingly, he did not ask her why she cried. He put his arm around her and kissed her on the nape of the neck. "You're tired, Norah," he said. "How about coming to town with me this afternoon? I need some repairs for the tiller."

She was about to say yes, eagerly, but checked herself just in time. For in a flash she saw the way clear to Brian, if only she used the right words and kept her head. She turned round slowly, thinking hard all the time.

"It's nice of you to ask me, Jim," she said. "Not today. But you'll take Phillip?"

He nodded sympathetically. "I guess I know how you feel. Of course I'll take the kid. Only, I don't want to leave you alone."

She smiled in a way she hoped was natural. "I want to go for a walk, Jim. A long walk. Honestly, it will do me a lot of good—clear the cobwebs out of my brain. And if you'll look after Phillip . . ."

Jim grinned in a way that made her feel things were going to be all right. "Don't you ever think of going for a *short* walk?"

"Even a short walk would be better than nothing. But when I start out I like to feel that I'm going all the way to the horizon."

"I know. You want to see what's on the other side."

He was silent a moment, considering. To her relief he offered no demur. "Maybe you're right, Norah. I know you miss your walks a lot."

Norah looked at Phillip, playing noisily with his blocks in the middle of the kitchen floor. "My ball and chain," she said lightly. "I'm a good mother, Jim. I love my child. But it will be nice to be able to step out without having him at my heels."

It was as easy as that. Less than an hour later Norah was walking briskly along the road-allowance that pointed west, towards Mud Creek, where Brian lived. Perhaps, though, she wouldn't find Brian at home, and—the thought coming suddenly—she had a moment of panic. But she banished the idea at once. Brian would be at home. He had to be. The events of the day were shaping themselves into a design premeditated by the kindly fates. If Brian wasn't at home the design would be incomplete. She was sure that she would see him.

Somewhere she must have crossed a height of land imperceptible to the eye. Now the prairie sloped away below her, mile after lonely mile, flat, monotonous, dead. Not dead really, and not altogether flat, but that was how it seemed, like a great sheet of parchment unrolled under the blue sky. Clusters of buildings here and there made little bumps on the surface, but many of the buildings, she knew, housed no living things except field-mice. A vast desolation, really; and that was as it should be, for the prairies were a battle-

field where men risked their hopes against the forces of the earth itself. In Ireland a landscape gave you no sense of conflict, not even, she supposed, in the evil days when the green hedges and shady woods offered cover to armed men bent on the destruction of their fellows. There the land itself—at Innishcoolín, anyway—was serene, companionable. One looked upon it with a feeling of comfortable intimacy, at the green old hills, the lochs not often ruffled, the tranquil lived-in farmsteads that had stood for generations. The quiet fields harboured no violence, no animosity towards man. But this new land was primitive, barbaric; hostile to man's encroachment. Thinking so, Norah said to herself, I'm being silly again, and tried to find comfort in the colours of the tiger-lily splashed violently along the roadside, in the clear blue and white of the cloud-flecked sky.

She had learned, in this new land, to measure miles not by mile-stones, for they did not exist, but by section fences and road-allowances. She passed the third mile and a minute later saw ahead of her, nestling in a little depression, a small unpainted frame shack, flanked by a few tumble-down out-buildings. Beyond the shack a fringe of bushes straggled across the prairie in a vagrant wavering line. Norah was sure that the bushes marked the course of Mud Creek. It was strange that Westerners were so unimaginative in their choice of place-names. Mud Creek, Rat Creek, Seven-Mile Lake, Stink Lake, Coyote Hill—these were a few she remembered having heard. The old Indian names, retained here and there, were romantic and musical even if you didn't know what they meant. By comparison the names given by the white man were harsh and unimaginative. But at least they were descriptively accurate. Mud Creek, Norah suspected, was exactly what its name implied.

She turned off the road-allowance and crept under a wire gate. The back of her dress caught in the barbs of the bottom strand of wire and she spent an uneasy minute or two, squirming furiously, before she was able to pull the dress free. She paused long enough at the gate to straighten the seams of her stockings. Recklessly she had worn her best nylons, hoping that Jim would not notice. Then she hurried along the rutted track leading to the shack in the hollow. Nearing the place she slowed her pace. Unaccountably she felt nervous. What, after all, was Brian going to think? But at once

she reassured herself. She would explain that she had gone for a walk, had seen the shack and wondered who lived in it—a woman's curiosity. He would suspect no more than that.

There was no sign of life anywhere. Norah went up to the door of the shack and knocked, tentatively at first, then with greater confidence. No voice, no sound of life, came from within. Drawing a deep breath Norah opened the door and peered inside. Then leaving the door ajar she stepped across the threshold into the empty room beyond.

She was glad that the room was small and flooded with sunshine. It didn't make her feel lonely or afraid. It was a companionable little room, sparsely furnished, certainly, with little more than the bare necessities: a small table, two or three straight-backed uncomfortable-looking chairs, a pot-bellied iron stove. But there were books in shelves along the walls, many books, and the sunlight brought out the colour of the bindings. No knick-knacks anywhere, no pictures, except one or two gaudy calendars; but the walls were painted a light cream, and the paint hadn't been altogether obscured by dust and age. A man's room, Norah said to herself, utilitarian, not too clean, but not actually dirty either. The room of a man who lived alone but hadn't allowed himself to go to seed. She had heard stories of what had happened to some men living alone on the prairies, men like Weary Rivers, and they hadn't been pleasant hearing. This was the room of one who had retained his self-respect.

Confident now, almost wholly at ease, she crossed the room and opened a door in the far wall. As she had expected, it led into Malory's bedroom. The narrow cot along the end wall, the small unpainted dresser beside it, were Spartan in their simplicity; but the austere effect was relieved by pictures hanging in an orderly row along one side of the room. Norah looked at the pictures with frank curiosity: the faded photograph in dingy gilt frame of a man and woman, tall, elderly, dignified, in the costumes of a former generation, who were, she supposed, Brian's father and mother; the pen-and-ink sketches, clipped from some old newspaper, of Michael Collins and William Butler Yeats; the cabinet-size photograph of a beautiful girl—she, too, of another generation, you could tell by the shingled hair—who stared back at Norah with an expression of

calm arrogance in her level eyes. There was an inscription in one corner of the photograph: "All my love"—but no name anywhere. Norah looked at the picture for a long time.

"Like her?"

Norah screamed and whirled about. Brian Malory stood in the doorway.

"Oh, Brian!" Norah gasped. "You—you frightened me!"

His contrition was genuine. He came forward and caught her hands in his. "I'm sorry, Norah, terribly sorry. But I thought you had heard me come in. Forgive me! I'll make you a nice cup of tea."

She went with him into the other room and sat down in a straight-backed chair. She had experienced a genuine shock and felt that her face must be white. "I . . . I shouldn't have been snooping," she said breathlessly. "I was out for a walk—just walking—anywhere, you know. I saw this place—wondered if it was yours—and when I found nobody home why I just . . . I . . ."

Malory poked up the fire and put the kettle on the stove. Norah was glad that his back was towards her for she did not want to look into his face. "I'm sorry you were just out for a walk," he said. "I was hoping you'd come to see me."

He turned to her smiling. His smile was disarming; she felt at ease at once. "I did come to see you, Brian," she said.

"Why?"

"Because I made a fool of myself."

Laughter crinkled the corners of his eyes. "We all do that, Norah, more or less. But why come to me about it?"

"Why not?" she parried, trying to make up her mind what to say next. "We're fellow-exiles, aren't we?"

He nodded. His face was sober now. "So we are, Norah. Tell me what's happened."

Norah told him, simply and, she believed, without equivocation. "You see, Brian," she concluded, "I've lost face before my husband and Gail Anderson. I knew you'd hear, sooner or later. I just thought I'd like to tell you about it myself."

Malory moved back to the stove and poured a cascade of hot water into the tea-pot. "Sorry there aren't any muffins," he said.

"Or anchovy toast. But we have biscuits, marmalade, peanut butter . . ."

Norah shook her head decisively. "Just tea, thanks."

Brian poured tea into china cups which he produced with a flourish from a corner cupboard, and added condensed milk. "But it's nothing, Norah," he said, sitting down beside the table, a cup of tea in his hand. "Nothing at all."

"Sorry, Brian," Norah said, a little stiffly, for she was at once on the defensive. "I can't think of what happened in quite that way."

Malory set his cup on the table and leaned towards her. "Look here, Norah," he said, almost brusquely, "I'm disappointed in you. You're not being very intelligent right now. Gail Anderson was right, of course. You had every reason in the world to keel over. She had none. You're a little fool, Norah. Can't you see that you did a brave thing? I don't think I'd have nerve enough myself to tackle a man I really thought was mad."

She had been right in coming to Brian. He said nothing she hadn't already heard from Jim and Gail, but from him the reassurance was genuine, the verdict of the detached outsider. "I'm glad, Brian," she said. "I feel a lot better now."

Quite suddenly she didn't want to talk any more about what had happened. The thing to do was to put yesterday behind her, to forget it had ever been. Of course, she couldn't do that, couldn't forget completely, and she and Brian might even talk about it later. But not now.

"You see," she explained, "your opinion matters a great deal to me."

"Does it? Why?"

She lifted her cup to her lips and was annoyed because her hand shook. She groped for the right words to say, regretting that she had aroused Malory's curiosity. She could not find them. "Because I think you're—wise," she stammered lamely. "Wiser than Jim or Gail—about a lot of things, anyway. And if you feel I wasn't an utter fool, why—I believe you."

Malory laughed shortly. "So I'm the local sage, am I? Flattering, I suppose, in a way."

"But I don't mean that, exactly," Norah began.

"You come to see me because I'm a wise old owl," he mocked. "Full of consolatory saws and good advice."

"You're wise, maybe," Norah said. "But you're not an owl. I mean . . ."

But what did she mean? How was she to put into guarded, non-committal phrases what she felt about Brian? Mercifully, perhaps because he sensed her confusion, he came to her aid.

"What do you think of her?" he said.

Norah knew without asking that he spoke of the girl whose portrait held place of honour on the bedroom wall, the girl who had written "All my love" and left her name unsigned. "I think she must have been very beautiful, Brian." And she could not help adding, with only a touch of malice, "A collector's item?"

For a moment something that might have been anger glinted in Malory's eyes. But the light went out at once, leaving his face curiously old and tired. "She was very beautiful," he said.

"As lovely as the pale stars?" Norah said, and was ashamed of herself.

Malory did not hear, or hearing, affected not to notice. "Tall, dark,—like you in so many ways."

"Were you in love with her?"

"Very much."

Norah did not ask any more questions, knowing that she had gone as far as wisdom allowed. Malory seemed lost in thought, or memory. When, after a minute, he roused himself, a look almost of surprise crossed his face as if existence in the present came to him as a shock. "I should have burned the picture long ago," he said smiling. "After all, she was only an episode. No more than that."

Norah suspected that he did not want her to believe him. His next words confirmed her suspicions. "Only," he said slowly, "there are some episodes you can't forget. No matter how hard you try."

That was all. He had in a sense told Norah nothing. He had betrayed no secrets. But Norah felt vaguely uneasy; uneasy, and in a more specific way disappointed. Malory had told her nothing directly but he had implied much. The carefully veiled words, the attitude of Byronic melancholy,—about them there was an atmos-

phere of theatrical make-believe which instead of enlisting her sympathy aroused in her a feeling of irritation. But she could not be sure that his romanticism was altogether a pose; perhaps it was a genuine part of his nature. That was the trouble with Brian; you could never separate in him the real from the illusory. Perhaps that was why the girl in the photograph had been no more than an episode in his life; perhaps she had willed things so herself. Some men, no doubt, liked to live in a state of wonder and suspense, to be titivated by uncertainty and doubt and hope. But no woman. A woman wanted always to know the truth.

Norah finished her tea and set the cup on the table. "I must go, Brian," she said. "Jim will be wondering where on earth I've got to."

"It wouldn't do," Brian said, "to keep Jim wondering."

But she did not want to go. No matter how much she wished to deny the fact, she did not want to go. Not for a little while anyway. There was no comfort in Malory's presence. Always she felt on edge, unsure of herself, a little apprehensive—the more so because her emotions had no tangible basis. True, he had kissed her once, but she had put him in his place without difficulty. She could not help wondering if he would kiss her again, before she left him. And if he did, what would she do? Make no demur, and so baffle him as she had done before? Or kiss him back? Certainly not, she said under her breath, and went on wondering.

But Malory made no move towards her. She suspected he knew what she was thinking, and the possibility stirred her to action. She stood up and smiled at him. "Thanks for the tea, Brian," she said.

He got up almost heavily. "Come again, Norah," he said, "and have another cup of tea. The kettle's always on the boil."

Almost she laughed at the absurd exchange of conventional banalities. She might have been calling on her maiden Aunt Elizabeth, her father's youngest sister, who lived by herself at Innishcoolín in a cottage no bigger than Brian's shack. Malory perhaps guessed what was passing in her mind.

"Even though I'm not at my best during the tea-hour," he added brusquely.

"You've helped me, Brian," Norah said. "Silly of me to need

help I know. But I'm a stranger in the land. You mean a bit of home to me."

Brian laid his hand on her shoulder. "You'll always be a stranger in this land," he said.

His voice was almost without inflection, but she knew that his words expressed a hope. She shook her head. "I think not, Brian. It's just that—I'm not ready yet to come to terms. Oh, I can't tell you what I really feel about the West. Only, so far, I don't think I've played quite fair . . ."

His hand continued to rest lightly on her shoulder. "Coming to terms doesn't mean playing fair," he said. "Sometimes it means giving up things you really believe in."

Again the distrustful spirit stirred in her. Sooner or later, when she talked to Brian, she felt that he was trying to draw her apart, to isolate her from the life which she wanted to test fairly. She almost said, "If you don't like the West why don't you go somewhere else?" but stifled the impulse to childishness. She said only, "I must go now," and looked at Brian calmly.

She heard the door open and turned towards it quickly but without alarm. When she saw Jim and Gail Anderson in the doorway she recoiled a step, and caught at the table for support. Somehow she gasped out a few words: "Jim! whatever in the world . . ."

Jim's face was strained, but somehow he contrived to smile. "I was worried, Norah," he said. "You were away so long."

She did not know what he was thinking, or whether he told less than the truth. She groped confusedly for words with which to answer him.

"I met Norah on the road-allowance," Malory said. "I lured her in for a cup of tea."

Norah flashed Malory a message of gratitude before turning to Jim. "I'm sorry, Jim," she said. "I'm afraid I walked farther than I intended. I needed a cup of tea—really I did."

She was oppressed by Gail Anderson's quietness. Gail stood in the doorway, just behind Jim, and said nothing at all. Her face was wholly without expression. In the silence—it lasted a moment only—

which followed her words, Norah wanted to scream. "Thanks for the tea, Brian," she said and slipping past Gail, went outside.

Phillip was sitting in the car behind the wheel. "Hi, Mummy!" he yelled, and tooted the horn wildly. Norah caught him in her arms and covered his grubby face with kisses. His presence relieved the tension. She could talk to Phillip instead of the others, until she had recovered her poise.

They got into the car, Jim and Phillip in front, Norah and Gail behind. Malory stood smiling in the doorway of the shack. "I'm sorry, Jim," Norah said again. "You shouldn't have worried."

Abruptly she turned to Gail. "I've been trying to get yesterday out of my system."

"I'm sure you've succeeded," Gail said. And because she smiled Norah could not be sure if she spoke with malice.

"I was cruising around looking for you," Jim said. "Gail was out for a walk too, and I picked her up."

Quite suddenly Norah felt better. There was no reason in the world why she should feel furtive about having called on Brian; it was a natural friendly thing to do, as natural as Jim's offering Gail a lift. She was ashamed now of her confusion, ashamed because Malory had lied to justify her behaviour. As soon as Gail left them she would tell Jim the truth.

They dropped Gail at her own gate. At once, before she had time to weaken, Norah put her resolution into words. "Jim," she said, "Brian didn't meet me on the road-allowance and lure me in with a cup of tea. I went in all by myself. Brian wasn't even at home when I called."

To her astonishment Jim began to laugh. He laughed so hard that for a moment he was in danger of losing control of the car. "Always the gentleman, Brian," he said at last, still chuckling. "Afraid I might have misunderstood."

Irrationally Norah was at once annoyed. Because she refused to be accessory to a clumsy lie she had, at some pain to herself, made her confession. But clearly the idea had never entered Jim's head that another man might be interested in his wife, or she in another man. His attitude towards her was positively medieval; he looked upon her as a patient Griselda, a woman who endured all

things, without emotions or impulses of her own. She could have tea with Malory every day for all Jim cared.

But just before they reached home a disquieting thought came to her. She was sure that when the shack door opened Malory's hand was still on her shoulder. Wisely he had withdrawn it deliberately, so that the gesture had in it no suggestion of guilty surprise. Still, his hand had been on her shoulder; they had been standing very close together. Gail Anderson, she knew, had seen. Jim must have seen too. But he had laughed like a lighthearted schoolboy when she told him the truth about her visit to Brian. Maybe if she told him that Brian had kissed her the day of the Twin Buttes sports he would laugh again. How, she wondered wryly, could you keep a man guessing when you couldn't even get him started?

CHAPTER 7

ALTHOUGH NORAH KNEW THAT JIM DID NOT THINK SIGNIFICANTLY of her relationship with Malory—if one could use the word to describe so tenuous a contact of personalities—he was concerned about her in other ways. He showed his concern in a hundred little gentlenesses that pleased but did not altogether surprise her, for Jim had always been thoughtful of her welfare. Now he stopped work every evening an hour earlier than usual so that there wasn't such a rush after supper; and sometimes he neglected jobs of his own so that he could help her with the dishes, or put Phillip to bed. Norah liked his attentions at first, but after a few days began to feel vaguely uncomfortable.

"Jim," she said one morning at breakfast, "work as late as you like tonight. I'm able to do my share, really I am."

He grinned at her boyishly, the way he always did when he had something exciting to tell. "I'll be quitting earlier than ever this evening," he said.

"But really, Jim . . ."

"There's a big dance at Paradise Vale tonight—last big shindig around here before harvest. What say we go?"

Norah was surprised, for Jim had never suggested going to a dance before. They had gone dancing a few times at her suggestion in the Old Country when Jim was on leave; once at Innishcoolín where reels and the lancers held dominance over the more modern steps and the fiddlers warmed themselves between dances with gulps of raw poteen. But Jim danced badly and always preferred sitting out to active participation. "I'd like to," she said honestly. "But what about Phillip?"

"Most people bring their kids along and put them to sleep on

desk-tops or in the cloak-room," Jim said. "But that's not so good, so I've arranged for Weary Rivers to come and baby-sit."

"But has he ever looked after children before?"

"It doesn't matter. I told him we wouldn't be going till the kid was asleep. Everything will be fine."

He had made all arrangements in advance and that was not like him unless he was going off to play baseball somewhere. Usually his suggestions—for a long drive, a visit to a town more distant than Twin Buttes, a call on a neighbour—were made spontaneously and all arrangements were her responsibility. This time things were different.

"I figure you've had a bit of a shock," he said by way of explanation. "And you haven't been getting out much lately. This ought to buck you up."

Norah agreed gladly. So far the summer had been dull, and she looked forward to a little excitement which she could experience without apprehension beforehand and regret afterwards. The school-house was sure to be hot and crowded, but the weather was still cool after the recent rains—the big thunderstorm had been the first of a succession—and the drive to the school and back would be pleasant. It would be nice, too, to get away without Phillip, for much as you loved a child his incessant demands for attention grew a bit wearisome. Paradise Vale was the school where Gail Anderson taught. Perhaps Gail was on her holidays now, but Brian Malory was sure to be there. The thought of seeing Brian suppressed her last maternal qualms.

"Phillip will be fine," she said. "He sleeps like a log these cool nights. And Weary looks the motherly kind."

"Better not let him hear you say so," Jim warned her. "Weary figures he's a hairy-chested he-man. But he wants to work for me in harvest so I guess he's willing to make concessions."

"He can sleep on the couch in the living-room," Norah said. "Only I hope he takes his boots off."

Weary arrived just before supper, bringing with him a bundle of magazines tied together with binder-twine. He grinned at Norah in a manner half-embarrassed, half-defiant. "I don't go much for books with hard covers on them," he said. "Figger that's the only kind you got. I got to do somethin' to keep me awake."

Norah glanced quickly at the cover of the topmost magazine in the bundle. "I see what you mean, Weary," she said. "But if you should happen to get tired you can sleep if you like. Phillip's really an angel after he's in bed. He won't be any bother."

Weary looked at her compassionately. "All kids are little hellers," he said. "Some more, some less. Mostly more. Wherever there's kids you got to expect the worst."

"We could tie him up," Norah said gravely.

Weary's face turned a bright scarlet. "Sorry if I been speakin' out of turn," he said stiffly. "You'll find out though."

"Maybe you're right, Weary," Norah said placatingly. "Lots of times I think so. Maybe children are like the little folk back in Ireland. You know we always talk about the little folk in a complimentary sort of way because we're really afraid of them. Maybe mothers make such a fuss over their babies because they know, way down in their hearts, that they're terribly dangerous."

"Figger you got somethin'," Weary said. "Just you think what a two-months-old kid would do if he could follow his nature. Theft—arson—murder—why, there ain't nothin' they wouldn't be into." He looked at Norah with new-found respect. "You got a head on your shoulders, Mrs. Armstrong. Not one to slobber over a kid."

"No," Norah said. "He does that to me." And she fled to the kitchen where she could indulge her mirth without offence.

As soon as she had tucked Phillip away and sung him to sleep, Norah dressed for the dance. She put on the white silk Jersey with the red belt. The skirt was above her knees, but she did not mind, for the influence of New York and Paris was not yet apparent in Twin Buttes. She used lipstick recklessly, careless of Jim's regard for public opinion, and painted her finger-nails a bright red, using an almost forgotten bottle of nail-polish which she unearthed from a corner of the dresser drawer. Before going downstairs she studied herself in the dresser mirror and was pleased with what she saw. Tonight, for some reason which she did not bother to analyse, she felt young and light-hearted, and knew that her appearance reflected her feeling. What, after all, did it matter in the long run if yesterday or last week she had been a little less than courageous? She was young and life was long and it was the final addition that mattered.

From now on things would be better. No more brooding, no more equivocation. She was like Hamlet—too many things sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. But not any more!

And straightway, the resolution taken, she fell to wondering about Jim's mother. Had she too once stood, a laughing girl, before her mirror, perhaps in this very room, thinking how all the men would look at her, and vowing that from this time on she would take life as it came and think no more on unhappy things? Jim's mother, who had died old at forty, crushed by what someone had called the vast indifference of the universe.

But tonight Norah would not be subdued. She went downstairs, walking with care on high heels which were now almost strange to her, laughing as she went. Weary Rivers, sprawled out on the chesterfield, lifted his head for a moment to look at her with wondering incautious admiration.

"You look pretty swell, Mrs. Armstrong," he said. "Just like one of these here movie queens." Then, startled by his own temerity, he blushed deeply and buried his face in his magazine.

"Thank you, Weary," Norah said, delighted with the unexpected compliment. "I'm sorry you're not coming to the dance. I'm sure we'd have a wonderful rumba together."

Weary shook his head in appalled silence. Norah did not torment him any more. "There are sandwiches and cake on the kitchen table," she said, "and you can make yourself some coffee. The percolator is ready on the stove."

She hurried out to the car where Jim was waiting. She knew by his face that he was pleased with her. "You look wonderful," he said. The feeling in his voice gave the words meaning beyond the merely conventional.

"I feel wonderful," she said smiling. "All dressed up for a night out with my best man. And it's your idea entirely. I like that."

Though it was after nine o'clock daylight still lay over the land. Jim drove over the road now familiar to Norah, past his fields where the grain stood straight and tall, the wheat nearly all headed out now and rustling in the night wind which blew softly from the west.

"Only a month to go," Jim said. "Thirty days and we'll be into it."

There was a funny little tremor in his voice that stirred in Norah feelings mostly maternal. "Don't count on it too much, Jim," she said. "There's so much can happen."

But he only laughed at her warning. "It's our year, Norah. I feel it in my bones."

Because she did not want to modify his happiness, even supposing she had the power, she did not say anything more by way of warning. Besides, she was in a fatalistic mood tonight. It was pleasant to feel that whatever was to be was written in the stars which would soon begin to show themselves faintly low down in the bowl of velvety sky.

Jim turned south and they drove into country Norah had not seen before. Ahead of them the land sloped gently upwards and Norah exclaimed in excitement, "Why, Jim, we're going up a hill!"

"A rise anyway," he said. "Wait till we get to the top."

The slope was barely perceptible. Norah did not know they were at the top until Jim stopped the car. "Look," he said.

Even in the twilight she could see far, farther, she believed, than ever before in her life, except perhaps from the deck of a ship surrounded by ocean. And on the horizon, greyish purple in the half-light, irregularities disturbing the otherwise unbroken line which marked the division between earth and sky, caused her to exclaim in rapture, "Jim! Hills!"

"When I was a kid," Jim said, "I called this ridge the Mount of Temptation."

"I know," Norah said. "You could see all the kingdoms of the world from here! Oh, Jim — hills — real hills! When can we go there?"

Jim turned off the motor. "That's ranching country off there," he said. "Or used to be. I guess it's mostly farming now."

There was an unmistakable note of regret in his voice. Norah turned to him, wondering. "I thought you were a wheat farmer through and through, Jim. You sound as if you didn't like what's happened."

There was a look on Jim's face she had never seen before. "Just before you came here, Norah," he said, "we buried a chap in the

Twin Buttes cemetery—veteran of the First World War. All the fixings, Legion parade, Last Post . . .”

“But, Jim,” Norah interrupted. He went on unheeding.

“I stood there beside a tombstone I had never noticed before. It stuck up straight and naked the way they do in these prairie graveyards. Better than most tombstones, though. Just a plain cross, maybe six feet high—no trimmings—nothing but the words, ‘Sacred to the memory of Muriel Logan, aged 22. May she rest in peace’. Something like that. I’ve got the ‘rest in peace’ part right anyway.”

“But Jim, why are you telling me this?”

He smiled at her, but she knew that his mind was far away. “Muriel Logan died twenty years ago,” he said. “She lived off there,” pointing towards the hills, now receding into the gathering twilight. “She was one of the Kendall tribe. They ranched in the hills. The Kendalls were wild, I guess. Whenever they came to town Saturday night someone usually phoned the Mounties. There was a lot of talk about Muriel, of course.”

“What kind of talk?”

“The usual. They said she was bad.”

“Was she really, Jim?”

“I don’t know. Oh, I guess she had lovers all right. She was beautiful.”

Norah did not say anything for a while. She could not understand why Jim was telling her about Muriel Logan. But her interest was stirred. A girl from the hills—one of the wild Kendalls—who was beautiful and bad. What had she meant to the boy Jim?

“Did you know her?” she said.

Jim shook his head. “I was a kid then—ten—twelve. But I remember the first time I ever saw her. I was in town for the mail. I’d ridden in on a spavined pony we used to have. I was standing outside the Post Office gawking around when she came riding up the street on a big black horse. Her hair was blowing in the wind and she had a red mouth and a look on her face as if she didn’t give a damn for anyone or anything. She was the most graceful thing you ever saw getting off a horse. Most women slide off like a sack of potatoes.”

“I know,” Norah murmured.

"But Muriel, she sort of floated down. I was standing there with my mouth open. She hitched her horse to the rail in front of the Post Office and then all of a sudden she turned and looked straight at me and said 'Hello, Jim,' and gave me the loveliest smile."

He broke off abashed. "Sounds pretty silly, I guess," he said with a little laugh. "She was the first girl I ever fell in love with."

"What happened after that?" Norah said. To her astonishment she was a little breathless.

"Not a thing. She went off down the street swaggering a bit—she was wearing breeks and riding-boots—and I can imagine now that her face was set hard. She knew what people said about her and pretended not to care. Maybe she didn't. I never saw her again, except once or twice at a distance. But I worshipped her for a long time. Used to lie awake nights wondering how she knew my name, planning what I'd say if ever she spoke to me again."

"What happened to her?"

"She married Slim Logan, a cowboy from Wyoming, who drifted up here. Nobody ever knew why. I was broken-hearted, of course, when she married him. Maybe I even cried one or two nights about it. But I knew all the time he was the perfect mate for her. He was tall and good-looking and the best rider who ever came into this country. There used to be stampedes around here in those days—quite a good one in Twin Buttes. There was never a rider could match Slim. A year after they were married Muriel died."

"How did she die?" Norah asked, a little catch in her throat.

"Quite undramatically, in childbirth."

Jim started the engine and slid the car forward into the gathering dusk. "I don't think Muriel would have thought much of her epitaph," he said. "Peace was the last thing she wanted."

"I saw Slim in town not long ago," he went on after a while. "He's fat now, fat and gross and old. Rides a battered flivver instead of a horse. There's a funny look on his face all the time now—puzzled sort of, as if he doesn't know what's happened to him."

Norah was sure there was a puzzled look on her face too. Why had Jim told her the story of Muriel Logan? Perhaps, in his years abroad, he had thought subconsciously of the West in terms of those early years when the wild Kendalls had lived in the hills and Muriel

had smiled at him. Ever since Norah had come to the farm Jim had been curiously withdrawn, on the defensive, one might have said. Perhaps he could not bring himself to face the truth that the West was no longer a society of glamorous cowboys and beautiful women; that it was respectable, dull, without character. Men did not live recklessly now; they huddled safe in shabby villages, living from the land but not on it. Jim, knowing what had happened, was wistfully unhappy.

But perhaps that wasn't all. Muriel Kendall was the first girl Jim had loved. He spoke half-jestingly, of course, but might he not be serious underneath? Were his words in some measure a warning that he cherished an ideal which Norah had not wholly displaced? Had Muriel Kendall, dead these twenty years and reluctantly at peace become in Jim's imagination a symbol of all that he wanted a woman to be—one who stirred the blood and made the heart beat faster? Was he telling Norah, without knowing what he said, that she had not measured up to the dream?

Of one thing only Norah was certain, that whatever Jim had disclosed tonight was an unconscious revelation. The next minute she was not so sure. Was Jim subtler than she had ever given him credit for being? She did not know, and because she did not know, the tension mounted in her so that by the time they came in sight of the school her nerves were on edge and she felt like crying. She must put the incident behind her. Jim would never speak of Muriel Kendall again, and she would never ask him. She would forget even the name.

But for tonight Muriel Kendall had put off mortality. Her spirit was abroad in a land where the dead stayed in their graves.

CHAPTER 8

PARADISE VALE SCHOOL STOOD AT THE EDGE OF A TINY VALLEY—‘gullies’ Norah had learned to call these slight depressions in the surface of the prairie—through which for a month or more after the snow had melted, water ran to the river ten miles away. Through the windows shone the light of powerful gasoline lamps suspended from the ceiling. It cast into clear relief rows of parked cars surrounding the squat little frame building. Within the school-house the dancers had been shuffling over the softwood floor, made slippery by liberal application of powdered wax, for an hour or more. But although the floor was crowded with couples dancing elbow to elbow, Norah saw Brian Malory almost at once. He was dancing with Gail Anderson. It seemed to Norah, watching with eager intentness and unaware of Jim’s voice at her ear, that dancing together—tonight at least—was no pleasure for either Gail or Brian. Gail looked pale and listless, though not, Norah admitted reluctantly, less attractive than usual. She could tell that Brian was talking rapidly, but Gail’s face betrayed neither animation nor interest, only a sullen apathy. Had they quarrelled about something, Norah wondered? It was none of her business really, but she was sorry Gail wasn’t having a good time. On a night like this everyone should be carefree and happy, as she herself intended to be. With a quick smile she said to Jim, “Aren’t you going to ask me to dance?”

“I’ve asked you three times,” Jim said, and led her on to the floor.

The three-piece orchestra from Twin Buttes consisting of piano, violin and traps, was vigorous if not always metronomically precise. The crowd was good-natured and bent on enjoyment. Norah smiled up at Jim, determined to catch something of the spirit of carnival.

But the evening wasn't turning out as she had hoped; she didn't feel carefree and happy the way she ought to. She could not get the story of Muriel Kendall out of her head, and seeing Brian Malory, though she had expected to see him, disturbed her further. Presently, she knew, he would ask her to dance. She wanted to dance with him very much, wanted to talk to him. The trouble was that no matter how innocent, how casual his conversation seemed to be, there were always undercurrents in it which carried her out of her depth. Tonight she felt insecure. She wanted Jim to hold her tight, dance cheek to cheek. But Jim's dancing was detached, impersonal. He heeded neither his partner nor the music.

Someone bumped into Norah from behind, the first of a series of collisions occurring in rapid succession. "Sorry," Jim said. "I don't seem to be steering very well."

His face was puckered into lines of intense concentration and the sweat was beginning to stand out on his forehead. "I should have brought along some pads for you," he said.

"I suppose you're going to tell me it's because I dance Old Country style," Norah said.

"No," he said, taking her seriously although her voice was light. "I'm rusty."

His apologies terminated with the dance. But for Norah the end of the dance brought no respite. Immediately the orchestra leader called for a Paul Jones and she knew without asking Jim that if she sat out the dance she would at once be damned as 'stuck-up'. So she bravely joined hands and circled about and presently found herself in the varying embraces of grizzled old-timers, perspiring and energetic, dapper youths from town whose assumption of bored affectation delighted her (though she was careful to hide her feelings) and bronzed farm lads, grinning, eager to please. Brian Malory and Gail Anderson were not among the dancers. Norah did not feel disappointed, for a Paul Jones gave one no chance to talk. She knew that Brian would dance with her later on.

He was in no hurry to ask her. When at last he came to the corner where Norah was sitting with Jim after a set of square dances which had reduced her to a state of near-exhaustion, she greeted him coolly. He had been a long time coming, and he had brought Gail

Anderson with him. Tonight Norah did not want to talk to Gail. She wanted to relax and enjoy herself, forgetful of all things unpleasant.

But Gail did not permit her to forget. "I'm glad to see you, Norah," she said, friendly concern in her voice. "I didn't expect to, after what happened."

"It wasn't anything at all," Jim said quickly. "Norah was fine the next morning. She went for a three-mile walk. Don't you remember?"

"To have tea with Brian," Gail said. "I remember."

She stared at Norah, insolently it seemed, with no warmth, only a kind of hard curiosity in her green eyes. Norah was bewildered; she could not understand the change in Gail. Not that she had trusted her ever; but Gail had been friendly on the surface at least, and tonight her enquiries seemed prompted not by solicitude but open and deliberate malice.

"It wasn't anything," Norah said, lamely repeating Jim's words. "I'm fine."

"Will you dance with me, Norah?" Brian said.

Norah looked at Gail and was astonished at what she saw in her face. Not anger certainly and not malice any more. Pity, she would have said, but that wasn't possible. She stood up and slipped her hand inside Malory's arm. "You'll excuse us, Jim?"

With Jim, with most of the men and boys who in a way flattering to her vanity had made haste to claim her hand, every dance had been a fox-trot no matter what the intention of the music. With Brian things were different, and for a minute or two Norah was content to yield to the sensuous enjoyment of the waltz. But she could not keep silent for long because of the disquiet in her.

"I really did make a fool of myself the other day," she said. And she could not help adding, "Just as Gail was telling you."

His eyes looking down at her held in them neither mockery nor condemnation. "Gail told me," he said. "Her version was only a little different from yours. You're worried stiff, aren't you?"

"Sort of," Norah admitted.

"About what people think? What Jim thinks?"

"And you," she said quickly.

"I told you the other day. Hasn't my dutch-uncle talk done you any good at all?"

"It did at the time," Norah said. "But now . . ."

She lifted her eyes to his. "Tell me the truth, Brian. What do you really think?"

"Does my opinion matter?"

"It matters a great deal, Brian."

"I know—because I'm wise."

"Not that," she interrupted quickly. "Not that at all."

"Then why?"

The conversation wasn't going the way she had meant it to. In a kind of panic she sought safer ground. "The fair thing," she said smiling, "is for you to tell me your opinion first."

He did not say anything more until they reached a part of the floor at a distance from the orchestra, so that he could speak without raising his voice. "Not all of it, Norah—not now. But you're a sensitive person. I knew that the minute I met you. And whatever happened the other day happened because you were acute enough to sense danger. Not to yourself, but others."

"But don't you see," Norah protested, "that's where I was wrong. I imagined things. There wasn't any danger."

"Laughlin tried to kill a man once," Brian said. "That's why they shut him up."

Oddly the knowledge that Laughlin was a homicidal maniac brought her no comfort. It was something that her intuition was confirmed, that there had been danger. But Gail Anderson hadn't fainted. Gail had fought the danger with courage and resource.

"Gail didn't faint," Norah said.

"Because she didn't know. You did."

"I wish I could believe you."

"Norah," he said, "you're the kind of woman who would face a thousand dangers and die a thousand deaths for something you believed in, or someone you loved. You knew Phillip was in danger and you were ready to die for him. And you never once thought of yourself, did you?"

His earnestness softened the melodrama of his words. Norah said, "No," honestly, and felt a warm glow of happiness. For the

moment she believed him, believed that she would indeed die a thousand deaths for someone she loved, for a cause she believed in. And in a moment the glow departed and she was saying to herself, it isn't really true because I didn't die for Phillip, I fainted.

"And now it's your turn," Malory said. "Tell me the truth, please. Why does my opinion matter to you? It doesn't matter to many people."

It was unfortunate that she should have seen Jim dancing with Gail Anderson just then. She had intended to say something flattering and without real significance, something like, "Because you're an Irishman and an Irishman's opinion is worth three of any other nationality." But Jim and Gail were dancing in a corner, a little bit apart from the crowd, and for just a minute she saw them clearly. They were cheek to cheek, hardly moving, and Jim was holding Gail closer than he had ever held Norah, much closer. His back was towards her and she could see Gail's white face over his shoulder. Her eyes were closed, her mouth curved in a half-smile of sensuous abandonment. Norah felt cold all over, felt as she did when she had seen the hands of the madman reaching for her child. Then at once she was angrier than she had ever been in her life before. She felt a wild hysterical impulse to rush across the floor and slap Gail's face. But the impulse died at the moment of birth. All she could do was try to imagine, with a fierce tingling pleasure, how it would feel to strike that red curved mouth with her open hand.

"You're tense, Norah," Malory said. "Surely we're not as serious as all that. Tell me, please."

She did not answer him in words. Instead she laid her cheek against him, not tentatively or as if by accident, but with provocative deliberation. Then yielding with a kind of fierce eagerness to the slightly increased pull of his arm, she allowed him to draw her body close so that she could feel the strong pressure of his thighs upon her own.

They swayed together—like Jim and Gail, Norah thought, hoping that Jim would see them. The music stopped with a mighty crash of cymbals only slightly out of time. Norah smiled up at Malory.

"Thanks, Brian," she said, "for the best dance I've had all evening." She did not draw her body away from his.

Malory's face showed no emotion whatever. "Good fun, Norah," he said. "What about a breath of air?"

She did not hesitate. Jim and Gail were still standing close together as if the end of the dance made no difference. "It is hot in here," she said casually.

They walked arm in arm across the dance floor still crowded with enthusiastic couples clamouring for an encore, past the row of chattering older women seated along the wall, the women who had come to look on, to gossip, and perhaps to take part in the square dances, hoping to recapture something of the emotions of times gone by. Norah knew that they were looking at her with cold inquisitiveness and she did not care. She was still furiously angry. If the old cats wanted something to talk about let them look at Jim and Gail Anderson. Jim was making a fool of her. Because she was angry she felt reckless and irresponsible. Whatever happened would not be her fault. She knew now why Jim had been so eager to go to the dance, why he had made all preparations beforehand so that she could not demur. He had known that Gail Anderson would be there. No doubt she had taken another long walk, a walk which led her to the field where Jim was at work.

The night was dark, for there was no moon. Now, cut off from the noises and the light and the companionship of her fellow-dancers which however disturbing was at least protective, Norah began to feel afraid. With the resurgence of the familiar emotion she wondered if she would ever be free of fear again. In this bleak world every act, every thought seemed to bring with it its accompaniment of doubt and tension and unhappiness. She did not want to go with Brian Malory now, but she did not know how to turn back from the course to which her actions had committed her. She went with him silently; and when they had passed beyond the range of the light gleaming from the school-house windows to where his car stood parked by itself at the edge of a straggling grove of poplars she wanted to run far away and be utterly alone, beyond reach of fear and shame, and people most of all.

She did not run away. Malory opened the car door and she got in quietly. She was in control of herself now; her anger had evaporated in the presence of the more familiar emotion of fear;

and her mind was alert. She would talk to Malory in a natural friendly sort of way. If there was liquor in the car, as she suspected—for the smell of whisky was strong on his breath—she would refuse to drink. She would be disarmingly casual. She would say now what she had intended to say about the importance of his opinion. That way she would restore between them the balance temporarily lost because Jim had provoked her to rashness. After all, she was committed to nothing. She had danced with Brian the way half the girls on the floor were dancing. No more than that.

Malory got in beside her. His body pressed close to hers—or so it seemed—and in an instant she forgot all that she had planned to do and say. In blind unreasoning panic she clawed for the door-handle, found it, and pushed open the door. She felt Malory's hand on her arm, and slid away from him through the door. Her high heel caught on the running-board and she fell forward on her knees to the ground. For a moment she remained there, bewildered, shocked, unable to comprehend the impulse which had driven her to act in a way her reason told her was ridiculous.

Malory put his hands under her arm-pits and lifted her to her feet. "Norah, for God's sake what's the matter?"

She stared at him stupidly. "I—I was afraid," she stammered miserably, and burst into tears.

"Get back in the car."

She obeyed without question. Malory stood by the open door, one foot on the running-board. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and threw it into her lap. "Dry your eyes with this and stop making a fool of yourself," he said roughly.

He was angry, so angry that his voice shook. "You're a fool, Norah," he said. "A silly little fool. You don't need to break your neck to save your virtue. It's in no danger."

Norah felt infinitely small and unhappy. "But that isn't fair, Brian," she said tearfully. "I thought that maybe you thought I was leading you on . . ."

"Weren't you?"

She could not answer. She sat in silence, wishing that something spectacular would happen—a wild storm, a bolt of lightning, an earthquake even—anything that would remove her from the orbit

of Malory's reproving stare. She could not see his face clearly but she knew that his eyes were fixed on her, in accusation, in reproach.

"Not really," she said at last. "It was just that I was upset . . ."

He got in and sat down beside her. "I know, Norah," he said, his voice gentle now. "And perhaps, after what happened that day at the river, I've no right to expect you to trust me."

She shook her head. "I *am* a coward, Brian," she said. "No matter what you tell me. But I'm not afraid of you any more."

His hand rested lightly on her knee, but she did not move away. Not even though she lied when she said she wasn't afraid of him any more. His voice was friendly now, almost casual.

"I wouldn't worry," he said. "About Jim."

Without giving her a chance to answer he opened the car door and got out. "We'd better go back now," he said. "People will be wondering."

She nodded quickly. "I'll be all right."

They walked back to the school in silence. Norah felt miserable and ashamed. How could she have been so incredibly childish! I'm like an adolescent who has seen too many movies, she told herself. But she couldn't help wondering still. Supposing she hadn't got out of the car, what would have happened then? And glancing quickly up into Malory's face she could not find the answer.

When they came into the light streaming from the school windows Malory stopped and looked at her closely. "You're mussed," he said smiling. "Better straighten up a bit unless you want to start tongues wagging."

"I'll bet they're wagging already," Norah said.

She slipped quickly into the school and down the hall to the end which had been curtained off with bed-sheets to serve as the ladies' dressing-room. A square dance was in full swing inside the school, and the only other occupant of the dressing-room was a handsome over-painted blonde who was adjusting a rolled stocking above her plump knee.

"Bust a garter," she explained briefly.

Norah looked down quickly at her own legs and straightened a twisted seam. Mercifully, her stockings hadn't torn when she had

fallen. "We really ought to be bare-legged on a night like this," she said, to make conversation.

The blonde studied her appearance in a small pocket mirror. "Good idea when there's wolves about," she said. "Like Brian Malory."

Norah was glad that she had her head down, for her face was suddenly on fire. But she was able to speak with controlled voice. "I hear he has quite a reputation," she said.

"You're telling me!"

Satisfied with what she saw, the blonde replaced the mirror in her hand-bag and closed the bag with a snap. She stood up straight and smoothed her dress over her wide hips. But she did not say anything more about Malory. Norah was disappointed.

"I don't know him well," she said. "He seems nice."

The blonde made snapping noises with her chewing gum. "Smooth, anyway."

Her eyes were cool, appraising. "We figured, though, that he was through playing the field. Time, too! He must be all of forty. Maybe more. But now . . ."

Norah took her lipstick from her bag and turned away so that the blonde could not see her face. "Is he engaged to Gail Anderson?"

The girl shook her head. "Not so's you'd notice. There's been talk, of course. All the old folks around here figure they should have been married long ago, before the war. Brian and Gail were that way about each other then and Brian's not one to hang around waiting for the preacher to give him the go-ahead before he gets what he wants. But things have cooled off some since, I guess. Only, I can't figure out why Gail came back."

The girl sat down again on the little bench in the corner and crossed her long legs so that Norah could see an expanse of bare thigh above the tightly rolled stockings. "Not that Gail's what I'd call a one-man woman myself. But when you get married I figure it's time to settle down. Maybe she thinks the same way. But I'd hate to take a chance on a guy who's made passes at everything he's seen in skirts. Including me."

She got up and moved close to Norah. "Look, tell me something?"

Norah put away her lipstick. "If I can."

"Are all Irishmen like Brian Malory?"

The question startled Norah into nervous laughter. "He's hardly typical," she said.

The girl nodded her fair head. She was young, her face too wise for her years. "I was nuts about him once," she said slowly. "He's got a line. And he looks sort of like Lawrence Olivier—the eyes and cheek-bones and things like that. I guess I was too easy, that's why he lost interest. But I don't know. Maybe it's sour grapes but Gail or anyone else can have him for all of me. I don't trust his kind."

"What kind?"

"I'd call him phony Irish," the girl said unexpectedly. "He talks all the time about the hills of Ireland and the fairy glens and the twisty roads and things like that—in between passes. Why doesn't he go back if he's so crazy about his darn hills?"

"Maybe he can't."

"Maybe he can," the girl said. "Only he wouldn't seem so romantic then."

She walked over to the curtain and drew it aside. "Dance over," she said. "Coming?"

"I'll be right out."

The girl looked at Norah deliberately, but now her blue eyes did not seem so hard. "Look, Mrs. Armstrong," she said. "Why don't you get wise to yourself? Jim's the swellest guy on earth. But that Malory's just a goddam heel."

She walked away, hips swinging. Norah followed her past the curtain, moving almost without thought, like an automaton. Brian was waiting for her at the doorway leading into the school-room.

"Let it never be said that I failed to escort a lady all the way," he greeted her, his inflection faintly underlining the word lady.

Norah smiled at him uncertainly. "Or that I scorned the escort of a gentleman," she said. "Even when he's one by compulsion."

And she added quickly. "You know I don't really mean that, Brian."

It was unfortunate that Jim should have intruded just then, for she wanted to ask Malory about the blonde. Cautiously, of course, in a way that would give no offence.

"Hello, you two," Jim said. "How's the moonlight?"

"There isn't any, I'm sorry to say," Norah said, keeping her voice light. "But it's nice and cool outside."

"Cool with Brian along?"

Norah was not in the mood for fatuous badinage. "Let's dance," she said to Jim, although just then she did not want to dance with anyone, Jim least of all.

They mingled with the crowd on the floor. "Having fun, Jim?" Norah said.

"You bet. A whale of a time." His voice did not ring altogether true.

"You seemed to be having a whale of a time all right when you were dancing with Gail Anderson."

The words slipped out before Norah knew what she was saying. Jim laughed without offence. "Gail co-operates all right," he said. "I figure she'd upset any man who wasn't married to you."

But the clumsy compliment only irritated Norah, and she was glad when Judd McKinley smote Jim a mighty blow between the shoulder-blades and claimed her for his partner. Judd's face was red, and streaked with sweat, and his breath smelled strongly of whiskey.

"Old woman'll give me hell for this," he confided in Norah's ear. "She figgers I ought to be past time for hoof-shakin'."

"But how could she?" Norah asked. "You dance beautifully." And to herself she said, you clumsy big oaf.

Judd was dubious. "Figger that's your line," he said. But he re-doubled his efforts to please, and though the orchestra was now playing a slow waltz, swung her around with such vigour that she was shaken and dizzy by the time someone tagged Judd and dissolved the strenuous partnership.

She was popular in the tag-dance. She passed from partner to partner so rapidly that there was no time at all for conversation, only a quick smile and brief salutation. When the dance was over she was breathless, exhausted, and strangely light-hearted again. Jim beamed on her with unconcealed pride.

"The belle of the ball," he said.

"That's because I'm new," Norah explained. But it was nice to be able to doubt her own words.

At midnight the women-folk hurried out to the hall to prepare lunch. Out of seemingly bottomless cardboard boxes and tin pails they brought forth a vast indigestible assortment of sandwiches, cookies, cakes, pies even, to be washed down by unlimited quantities of lemonade brought in stone crocks and cream-cans by housewives previously designated to the task. Norah found herself working side by side with Mrs. McKinley, who presided over the sandwich platters.

"The old fool," Mrs. McKinley said, without preamble.

"You mean?" Norah said, puzzled.

"Judd. Feelin' his oats at his age!" Mrs. McKinley's face was red and angry. "And that Malory's been givin' him a snifter now and then to make things worse."

"He seems to be having a very good time," Norah said apprehensively. And because she felt sorry for Judd she added a lie on his behalf. "He really dances very well."

"I been watchin'," Mrs. McKinley said. "He's all right in the square dances he was brought up on. Keeps one foot on the ground most of the time. But those others—he gets in them just so he can get a holt on the girls. Not in any hurry to let go either. No fool like an old fool, that's what I say."

Her tone precluded further discussion of Judd's shortcomings. Norah unpacked the modest box of food which, at Jim's suggestion, she had gathered together at the last minute, and set some sandwiches on a platter already stacked high with the offerings of other housewives. She was busy arranging the monumental pile so that it would not topple over, when out of the confused babble of voices around her, coherent words reached her ears.

"I'm no denyin' he's a gentleman—his manners are as good as a lord's—but he's an arrant rascal."

It was the little Scotswoman, Mrs. Cliff, speaking. Norah, piling sandwiches now without conscious thought of what she was doing, strained her ears to catch whatever else Mrs. Cliff might say.

"He would have settled down, I'm thinkin', if yon lassie hadn't

come along with her pretty face and come-hither look. But now there's no tellin'."

Someone made a noise like steam escaping. Mrs. Cliff, suddenly aware of Norah almost at her elbow, lifted her voice in a salutation enthusiastic and strained.

"So there ye are, Mrs. Armstrong! I've been wantin' a wee word with ye all evenin' but the men-folk have been buzzin' round so that a body couldn't get within earshot without a permit."

"Or pants," someone interjected, and there was a swift cackle of laughter.

The 'wee word' was meaningless, merely a hasty query about how Norah was liking the West, intended to cover obvious embarrassment. Then Mrs. Cliff slipped quickly away. Norah was disconcerted and confused. The reference to 'yon lassie' was unmistakable. She had disturbed Malory just when he was on the point of 'settling down', whatever that meant. But why did these women think so? What word or act of hers formed the base of their suspicions? Malory had taken her and Phillip for a short drive in the country and no one, she was sure, had seen their kiss; he had let her ride his horse along a country road; he had given her tea in his shack as any civilized person would have done; and tonight they had gone outside together for ten minutes. Their relations, so far as outsiders were concerned, had been no more than those of casual neighbours.

But people were talking. Here in this wide lonely land where men lived far apart and saw one another seldom, her every act, every word, were being watched and listened to. Here women knew more, suspected more, than people living in the city knew or suspected of their fellows in the same apartment block. Their conclusions might not be altogether inaccurate, Norah admitted, but how had they been arrived at? From now on she must be very careful. From now on she would treat Brian Malory with coolness and indifference. It was not the kind of treatment he really deserved, but she owed it to Jim to stop the gossip about her before it reached his ears.

But it was not going to be easy, she found, to keep her resolution. After lunch had been cleared away and dancing resumed with, if anything, greater vigour than before, Malory came again to the

corner where she was sitting with Jim, and claimed her for another waltz. And his first words disarmed her completely.

"I've been thinking, Norah," he said. "Thinking about you and me. Perhaps we'd better not see any more of each other, for a while, anyway."

She looked up at him, startled. "But Brian, why on earth shouldn't we?"

He shook his head, smiling. "You're an innocent soul, Norah. You don't know how people talk—especially in a land like this."

Perversely she felt cross. "I do know, Brian. But I see no reason why we should care what people say, so long as we know there isn't any justification for their scandal."

He was quiet at that. But just before the dance ended he spoke again. "And besides, Norah, if I were to go on seeing you, I couldn't guarantee that I'd always behave like a gentleman."

"But you'll have to, Brian," Norah said laughing. "After what happened tonight I'd be afraid to jump again."

She was not being cool and indifferent the way she planned to be. But now she knew that she didn't really want to break with Brian Malory. So long as he was near her she would never stagnate emotionally. In a dull world of conformity—strange how conventional these Westerners were who prided themselves on being the most emancipated people on earth—Malory was a vital incongruity. However much Norah feared and mistrusted him, she could not deny his attraction. But there must be no more kisses.

For always there was Jim, who had first claim on her loyalty and her love. Thinking now of Jim she was sorry that Malory had ever come into her life to disturb, be it ever so slightly, the placid intercourse of mind and body existing between herself and the man who was her husband. In the next moment, thinking of what life would be like without Malory to give it savour, she hoped passionately that he would never go away.

CHAPTER 9

ON THE PRAIRIES EACH DAY WAS LIKE THE DAY BEFORE. THE SUN rose at a time which Norah had always associated with the dark hours of profoundest night, and its light still coloured the lower rim of the western sky when she went to bed. The components of each day were wind and heat and sunlight, varied by rainfall which, however important it might be in terms of growth and crop-yield, was so occasional that it left the pattern almost unaffected. The routine which filled each day was as unvarying as the day itself: cooking, eating, washing dishes, house-cleaning, a futile battle against dust which seemed to filter through the very walls, tending to Phillip's innumerable wants. And once in a while a trip to town or a visit to a neighbour, these last—like the rain—so infrequent as to provide no noticeable change in the pattern of things.

The days were pleasant enough once you got used to the heat, but without savour. In the lives of the prairie folk today did not matter; everyone lived for tomorrow. Perhaps, Norah reflected, because everyone was young, if not in years then in aspiration. The men who tilled the land about Innishcoolín were heirs to the wisdom of their ancestors, a wisdom cumulative over a hundred generations, hence based on knowledge scarcely to be separated from instinct. There life moved slowly and men made no haste to the fields. In the final reckoning an hour more or an hour less did not matter. Neither did tomorrow, for tomorrow, they knew, would bring no reward greater than today's. There was a way of life in Ireland and, so Norah supposed, in all places where men worked the land of their ancestors. But there was none here in the West, only a feverish preparation for that tomorrow which, when it came, was not important in itself but only because it anticipated the day after.

Many times these days Norah thought of old William Thomas Connelly, who by favour of Uncle James lived rent-free in a thatched filthy cottage on a point of rocky land in the lower meadow where burn and river joined. For more than seventy of his eighty-odd years William Thomas Connelly had worked as labourer on land which he had never owned; he had not been twenty miles out of Innish-coolin in his life; and he had rarely, until he became eligible for the old-age pension, fingered a pound note. But he had lived a richer life than Judd McKinley or Albert Cliff; and whoever came to his cottage, whether by chance or invitation, was sure of finding good entertainment there. For in the many years of his life, outwardly years of hard work and little reward, William Thomas Connelly had learned many things that mattered. He had taken time to learn these things, because no increase of diligence in his work would have brought corresponding material reward. There were a thousand stories on his tongue that he told often and well, stories of the Little People and the Hard Times and the Trouble. And he knew a thousand songs, many of which he had often sung to Norah in a high cracked voice to his own accompaniment on a squeaky violin, songs like *The Boyne Water* and *The Protestant Boys*, and even—for in the domain of art William Thomas Connelly recognized no religious or political boundaries—*The Soldier Boy* and *The Wearin' of the Green*. And once he had sung for Norah all the stanzas of Mangan's *My Nameless One*, to an unfamiliar tune in a familiar minor key:

*Roll forth my song, like the rushing river
That sweeps along to the mighty sea.
God will inspire me while I deliver
My soul of thee!*

In retrospect there was absurd incongruity between the appearance of the bard and the words of his song, but there had been none at the time of the singing.

The men she met here in the West who were so proud of their land, the women who talked of things being different meaning better, would not grow into old age as William Thomas Connelly had done, serenely and without haste. Life was physically easier here

all right, but it slipped away so fast that men had no time to ripen. Judd McKinley and a million like him would to the end of their days watch the weather and hate the hail and the frost and look forward with a kind of tremulous anxiety to tomorrow, and when tomorrow came to the day after.

But Jim would never be like Judd McKinley. He didn't care enough. Not that he hadn't done his share of worrying about the weather, and with reason. But he wouldn't have to worry much longer. For now the touch of autumn was upon the earth, and across the prairies the colour patterns were changing day by day. There was nothing blatant, as she had half-expected, about the new designs. Dull grey wherever grass grew, yellow along the roadsides where masses of golden-rod bloomed, streaks of yellow in the wind-breaks, green and yellow-green and light gold in the grain-fields. A yellow-golden autumn, hardly any russets and no reds at all. But yellow and gold everywhere spread out beneath a sky that seemed a lighter blue than the blue of spring or summer.

To Norah autumn was the loveliest by far of the seasons in the West which she had seen and lived through, and its loveliness brought with it an accompanying sense of tranquillity and detachment which she had not known earlier. Like the spring, autumn was a season of hard work and long hours, but there was a great difference too. For seed-time was by anticipation a time of doubt and anxiety; now the time of doubt and fear was all but past. The drought had done its worst, the threat of hail had passed with the summer, and though on three successive nights frost warnings had gone out over the radio and the temperature had hovered just above the freezing mark, the front of cold air had passed on and now the days were warm and sunny and the harvest moon rode the skies. And though the wind still blew at times, it did so with diminished violence, as if it too no longer had power to menace the fortune of men.

Around Twin Buttes the weather gods had smiled. Jim's wheat, like that of his neighbours, stood straight and high, well-filled and without blemish. He talked now of an average of twenty bushels an acre for sure, and Norah knew that he was not given to boasting. Only a few miles away—north, south and west—the picture was

different. Those parts the heavy thunderstorms of the midsummer had passed by, and at least two municipalities were certain applicants for the government crop-failure bonus. And less than fifty miles to the east the grasshoppers had descended on the fields earlier in the year, leaving almost total devastation in their wake.

But whatever the catastrophes in nearby communities, Twin Butte rejoiced in an ample harvest. And of all the crops in the neighbourhood, there was none, so Mrs. McKinley told Norah, to equal Jim Armstrong's.

"You must have brought him luck," she said, looking as if she doubted her own words. "Before the war the place was weeds mostly. Weeds and dust drifts."

Jim himself was exultant. "Summer fallow is hitting fifty," he told Norah the day he started harvest. "We'll average around thirty all through. Four hundred acres, say a dollar and a half a bushel. Figure it out for yourself."

Norah took pencil and paper and laboriously figured it out for herself. Twelve thousand bushels of wheat at a dollar and a half a bushel, eighteen thousand dollars. She stared at the result incredulously. Over four thousand pounds! She checked and re-checked the results, but could find no error in her calculations. Why, they were rich! She warned herself that the crop wasn't off yet, though the forecasts predicted no break in the fine weather. And expenses would be high. There would be a lot of what people called 'overhead' and she knew that farm profits were nearly all ploughed back into the land. She was not sure what 'ploughing back' meant, except that it was something which never left any money for furniture or clothes or holidays or any of the things a busy housewife looked forward to. Jim would need a lot of new machinery, of course, and there would be income tax to pay, though Judd McKinley assured Jim he had never paid a cent of income tax in his life and didn't figure to. Perhaps Jim would want even more land. Westerners, so Norah had heard or read, were chronically land-hungry.

Still, eighteen thousand dollars was a lot of money. There would surely be something left over after 'ploughing back', and the new machinery and the income tax. Presently Norah laid down her pen and began to picture the interior of the house as it would be

after she had re-decorated and re-furnished it. But not for long. She could not speculate with enthusiasm for she had no trust in fortune, not even when the limited fulfilment at least of her dreams seemed assured.

It was a good time, a golden time. Jim was up and away at day-break, but now Norah was up before him, for Jim had hired Weary Rivers for the harvest, and pride would not let Norah stay in bed when there was breakfast to be got for an outsider. A foolish pride, an unworthy pride maybe, since she had permitted Jim to get his own breakfast in the spring. But not altogether pride either. She really wanted to be up early. The days were so lovely now that she hated to miss a moment of their mellow beauty. They seemed lovelier even than the days of spring, perhaps because the tinge of death was on them. Each morning now when she got out of bed and raising the blind saw the incredible dawn flame across the sky the words of the poem learned long ago and all but forgotten ran through her mind:

*Look thy last on all things lovely
Every hour.*

It was strange how almost forgotten poems which had had no meaning for her in the old life came alive in the new. Now in the fall of the year she looked at everything with heightened feeling, knowing that she could not look for long.

Things would renew themselves, of course. The grass would grow green again and wither when the heat came; the sky would recapture the opalescent tints now faded, and across the prairie mile upon mile of grain-field would turn from black to green, to yellow, to yellow-gold; the wind would toss the standing grain into a turbulent wave-hollowed sea, and the prairie-chicken and Hungarian partridge would year after year whirr aloft in violent staccato flight. But there would be differences. Tricks of light and shade resulting from a combination of elements never to be repeated, she would not catch again. And she herself would be changed another year, so that all emotional experiences wrought through the senses would change too. Because she would never feel quite the same any more about the scarlet dawn and the tapestried sunset, or the cloud-

shadows hurrying across a waving grain-field on a windy day, she looked at these things as long and often as she could.

Paradoxically, since it was the forerunner of death, autumn brought to Norah a feeling of permanence. She had seen two seasons come and go, and she had been ill at ease and unsettled all the time. The tension which exists to some degree in all rural communities between seed-time and harvest had found in her a rich breeding-place. But now she laughed at the foolish fears and fancies which had beset her in an earlier time, as on the day she had walked to the Anderson house through the rain, in a world alive with unseen inexplicable terrors, terrors which till lately had never been far away.

Now all things were changed. She felt at ease and secure when she walked across the fields, Phillip tagging at her heels, full of childish volubility, to where Jim and Weary drove the huge combine round and round the field of standing grain. She loved to watch the field contract, draw in upon itself, at last to the point of extinction. As soon as Jim saw her coming he always waved his straw hat, and his words of greeting never varied: "Thought you were never going to get here." Then he and Weary would sit in the shade of the combine and eat thick sandwiches greedily and in haste, and drink cup after cup of strong hot tea. Lunch over, Phillip always rode on the combine for a round, or several rounds if the field was small, until his face was thick with dust and his heart thumping with the tremendous exaltation of spirit that comes only to a small boy who feels, however mistakenly, that a mighty machine is responsive to his touch and bidding. Then back across the field, reluctantly both of them, Phillip tagging a long way behind, to the farmhouse which was no longer bleak and comfortless, although it had not changed in outward appearance from the day Norah had first seen it—the farmhouse which was home.

Glorious days, all of them! Crowded days, for Jim and Weary were hard at work from the first hour of dawn. They worked late if the dew held off, sometimes till long after dark, and went to bed at once after supper. Then Norah washed the dishes and tidied the house, so that it was often near midnight when she went to bed. Jim was always sound asleep when she went into the bedroom. She liked to look at him stretched out on his side, his face half-buried in the

pillow. Always he left the blind up so that if the moon was shining the moonlight streamed in, touching everything in the room. Sometimes Norah stood in its path just before putting on her night-gown, wishing that Jim would wake up and look at her naked body silvered over with moonlight. But always, just before getting into bed, she pulled down the blind.

Saturday was the best day of all. Then Jim and Weary quit work at six o'clock no matter how fine the weather, so that supper was over by seven or earlier. As soon as supper was over, Jim helped Norah with the dishes; and while he shaved at the washstand in the shed adjoining the kitchen, Norah changed Phillip's clothes and her own. By eight they were on their way to town. At first she had felt guilty about letting Phillip stay up so late—seven was his usual bed-time—but they were always home by eleven o'clock at the latest, and Phillip could sleep undisturbed for as long as he liked on Sunday.

Partly the enjoyment of these Saturday night excursions to Twin Buttes lay in their novelty. In Innishcoolín Saturday night had been the same as any other night, except when the Orangemen paraded through the streets thumping away on their big drums and shouting "To hell with the Pope". But it was different in Twin Buttes and, Norah supposed, every town in the West. None of the stores closed before ten o'clock, the combined pool-room and barber-shop much later. Shopping took half an hour or so; then Norah and Phillip returned to the car, which Jim always parked in front of the Co-Op. From the car they made periodic sallies for ice-cream, and all-day suckers which, belying their name, seldom lasted more than five minutes. Jim and Weary hung about in front of the brightly-lit stores chatting with the neighbours, for on Saturday night the town was always full of farmers and their families seeking to escape for an hour or two from the relentless toil of harvest. There were, Norah believed, only two possible topics of conversation among them: the crops and the weather. The disintegration of a people, the rise of a dictator, the fall of an Empire—news that might have shaken the earth—touched Twin Buttes not at all. Not on Saturday night. Not until the harvest was safely gathered in.

It was pleasant to sit in the car and speculate about the people

who passed and re-passed before you. Family groups from the country to whom Saturday night was a serious ritual, with many purchases to be made, many greetings exchanged; the young town girls, fresh-faced and with bright painted lips, who walked arm in arm up and down the length of the wooden sidewalk, stopping often to talk with the young men lounging about the store-fronts, sometimes going with them to Lee Wong's for ice-cream or cokes; the drunks who progressed with unsteady dignity along the sidewalk, never wandering far from the door of the beer-parlour in the corner hotel; the crowd that flowed in and out of the pool-room, where, through the plate-glass window, you could see figures bending over the green-baize covered tables; and always, under a powerful naked bulb in the front of the room, a man sitting upright in the chromium-plated chair with Johnny Bates the barber ministering to his needs. Sometimes people whom Norah knew stopped to talk to her, and admire Phillip's astonishing development. "Best country in the world for the weans," Mrs. Cliff assured her. Best country in the world for everything was what Mrs. Cliff and the rest of them really meant.

Norah no longer disagreed with them wholly. For the serenity of spirit which had come to her with the autumn affected not only her attitude to the physical world about her, but to the people who inhabited it. She thought she understood them better now, and understanding dissipated resentment. They were ordinary human beings who like herself were on the defensive, not against one another but an environment which compelled them to fight or perish. You could love this strange lonely land as some men loved the sea or a beautiful mistress—or as some women loved some men, men like Brian Malory for instance,—with selflessness, with passion, but never with complete trust. That was why human relationships here were so easily entered into and so slow to mature. Men had no time to cultivate one another. The pact with nature was all-demanding. Norah knew that she and Jim had been lucky this year. Most of the people around Twin Buttes had been lucky this year. But already they were beginning to talk of next year. Always their thoughts were of tomorrow because security was never won today.

But eighteen thousand dollars! Over four thousand pounds!

And when at last, in the middle of a late September afternoon, Jim and Weary drove the big combine into the yard and stopped in front of the machine-shed where shortly the combine would be put away for the winter, Norah dared to think of how the money might be spent. But to her delight, it was Jim who first spoke of things to be bought. They were lingering over their after-supper coffee, alone, for Weary had gone off to town to celebrate the end of harvest with an orgy of beer and movie magazines, when Jim set down his cup and looked at her quizzically.

"The money's burning a hole in my pocket already," he said, "What are we going to do with it?"

Norah affected an air of wisdom which had nothing to do with the way she was feeling. "I suppose you'll be wanting more land," she said. "And, of course, after you get what machinery you want there won't be an awful lot left. And we mustn't forget the income tax . . ."

"I told you once you'd read too many bad novels about the West," Jim told her. "Novels about the West are all out of date. We've learned a lot in the last few years. We're not land-hungry any more. I'm not, anyway. If anything, I'll cut down. Maybe sell the Anderson quarter. A section is more than enough for one man to look after properly."

"But there's the new machinery," Norah said.

"What's the matter with the machinery I've got? Most of it was new last spring. I owe three thousand on it but I'll clean that up next week. Then a couple of thousand income tax, unless I get Judd to fill out my form for me. The rest is gravy—pure gravy."

"But what will we do with it?" Norah said in a shaky voice. It was hard to believe there was really money to spend, money to spend on the things which she had dreamed about but never for long, because until only a few weeks ago they had seemed wholly unattainable.

"A holiday first," Jim said. "To the mountains. It's late for tourists so we'll have the Rockies all to ourselves. Believe it or not there are mountains in the west, the biggest you ever saw. Afterwards we'll fix up the house. New clothes for all of us! Come winter, a fur coat for you. And not out of the catalogue either. How does it sound?"

She did not answer him at once. Her mind had leapt ahead and she was seeing the house as she wanted it: the kitchen in pale green and cream, new linoleum on the floor, cupboards everywhere, drapes for the living-room windows, a chesterfield with slim graceful lines, a rug—a real rug—on the floor. And a piano, of course, perhaps even a baby grand, and music piled high on top of it—Brahms and Debussy and Chopin and the *Pathétique* and *Appassionata*. There would be book-cases all along one wall, shelves enough to hold Jim's trunkful of favourites and her own, which she would have to buy because she hadn't been able to bring any out with her—all the Irishmen of course, Yeats and O'Casey and O'Flaherty and A.E. and the man whose name she couldn't remember who wrote about Connemara and the Western Isles. Synge, that was it. And the classics too, that she hadn't looked at since she left school but which she would read to Phillip as he grew older. Pictures, dozen of pictures. She had always liked lots of pictures on a wall. Not just a single isolated exhibit surrounded by acres of wall-paper, but good reproductions, and some by local artists too if she could find any, all framed in plain light wood.

"We'll put in electric lights," Jim said. "Tack on a bathroom. Outdoor plumbing in winter-time drives more women from the farm than a herd of cows."

Norah was glad of an excuse to laugh. Jim laughed too, and Phillip joined in quickly.

"What's funny, Mummy?" he demanded, breaking off abruptly.

Norah jumped up, caught him in her arms and hugged him. "You are, Phillip," she said. "Oh, Jim, it's a grand world, isn't it?"

He looked at her, smiling and proud. "We're doing all right."

"But, of course," she said wisely, "we've got to think about next year."

Jim shook his head. "Not too much, Norah. That's what people here have been doing since they came. I think it's wrong to be a next-year country. Sure, we'll keep a little in reserve. We can afford to. But we're going to think about now."

Norah was pleased and surprised. Surprised because she hadn't known the way Jim was thinking. It was nice to be finding out

things about a man even after you'd been married to him for over four years. But then, they had been together hardly at all.

"I'm glad, Jim," she said. "And you're right. We've come a long way."

She couldn't help thinking about Brian Malory just then, Brian and Gail. She thought of them mostly with pity. Brian didn't mean anything to her now. Why, she had hardly seen him since the dance. He had never meant anything, except an antidote to dullness. Things would be different now, different always. It wasn't just because she was going to have a piano and pictures. She remembered what Jim had told her once: "In winter we really live." She hadn't believed him then, but it was true. She and Jim were just beginning to live now. He was young, alive again, like the Jim she had known and loved almost at first sight a long time ago, the Jim she had for so long lost sight of. She pitied Brian Malory and Gail Anderson because they had none of the things she had and could never have them. She was glad that she had let Brian kiss her, glad that she had pressed her body close to his. For she knew now that he didn't matter. No recollection of casual half-intimacy had power to move her. Jim, she was sure, felt the same way about Gail. Life was suddenly unexpectedly simplified, and fear a thing almost forgotten.

Weary came back from town about ten o'clock only slightly drunk, a bundle of magazines under his arm, a bag of candy in his pocket for Phillip. Tomorrow he would go back to his own shack—reluctantly, for he had found life with the Armstrongs pleasant. The food was good and they let him alone. Tonight he did not as usual slip at once into the little den adjoining the living-room where Norah had fixed up a bed for him.

"Figger I'll read a while," he said. "If you folks don't mind."

"Read all night if you want to," Norah said. "We'll go to bed whenever we feel like it."

But that wouldn't be for a while yet. Tonight she felt restless, exhilarated. She and Jim should be celebrating the end of harvest, making thank-offerings to the gods for an abundant crop. "I know," she said to Jim, "let's put up an altar in the yard—a sheaf on the top of a fence-post or something—and we'll dance around it in the moonlight."

"We could go for a walk," Jim said.

The suggestion delighted her, all the more because it had come from Jim. "Jim, a walk in the moonlight—a long, long walk! Hours and hours!" She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him. He picked her up and held her close, laughing while he returned her kiss.

"Maybe if we stay out till midnight we'll see the little folk dancing in the stubble," she cried.

"Rabbits more likely," Jim said.

But the prosaic words could not disturb her mood. She ran upstairs for her tweed coat and down again laughing all the way. "Jim and I are going for a walk, Weary," she said. "A long walk. Don't wait up for us. I don't know when we'll be back."

Weary looked at her as he usually did, bewildered. "Walk? Where?"

"To see the fairies tossing their milk-white arms in the air and Pan chasing Diana down the road-allowance."

She ran over to Weary and patted him lightly on the shoulder. "Just for a walk, Weary. With my man in the moonlight. If Phillip wakes up and yells tell him Daddy and Mummy will be home soon."

"If this was spring I could figger it out," Weary said. "It beats me."

The night was calm and cloudless. The harvest moon was half-way up the sky, its light so brilliant that Norah fancied she could distinguish objects around her almost as clearly as in the day-time. By the time they reached the road she was thinking, why was I ever afraid? For even in the moonlight the world about her was familiar. Familiar and friendly now. As they walked arm in arm down the road, Jim humming a tune very softly so that it did not disturb her reflection, she thought of the afternoon when she had walked alone in the rain along this same road, her heart heavy with foreboding. Then there had been evil things crouching behind every fence-post, in every clump of weeds. All that was past now, and she would never be afraid again. There would be loneliness sometimes, for loneliness came in many forms and to all men. But she felt safe now, a feeling which she had never really known before. Not in Ireland in the old house with her father and Aunt Lucy, for there she knew,

from the time she was not more than ten years old, that her father was a broken reed, and that whatever was given to her was given not as hers by right but in charity. Aunt Lucy had assumed a responsibility she could ill afford because family pride commanded. To be sustained by pride and charity instead of love—though Aunt Lucy had liked her well enough in a remote well-bred way, never forgetting that Norah's father had married beneath him—meant uncertainty and heartache; and when she was old enough to work for herself the war had come and threatened the very foundations of her existence, insecure as they already were, and even that existence itself. But all those evil times were past and now her life was secure. She was Jim's wife, Phillip's mother, and there was food and drink more than enough. And love! Love most of all. The triumph had been easy, the sense of doom banished with a snap of the fingers. "I am the master of my fate," she said aloud, and laughed.

"You'll frighten Pan," Jim said.

And that was another thing that caused her heart to rejoice—the difference in Jim. Not that he had really changed, rather reverted to what he had been when she had first known him. Then she had so often been surprised by his sensitivity, his awareness of things that mattered which had its roots in instinct and owed little to formal training. In Ireland his feeling for things had nearly always been right somehow, although he could never clearly explain why he felt the way he did. He might be as ignorant as the brashest tourist about things concerning Ireland's history and traditions, but he never once offended against the canons of good taste in what he said. He had what Aunt Lucy would have called innate good breeding, the kind which did not necessarily derive from blood.

But things had been different, disappointing, all summer. Norah now knew why. It wasn't because, as she had once foolishly fancied, he was dreaming of a romantic past unrealizable in the present, of Muriel Kendall or Gail Anderson or anyone else; it was simply that no man is himself under great strain, because great strain is abnormal. But that was how men lived in the West between seed-time and harvest, beset on all sides by enemies they could not fight against: hail and frost and drought and grasshoppers; so that their essential selves tended to disappear behind an elaborate defence mechanism

created to meet a sustained crisis. Jim had not been himself all summer. Now he had come back to her in his own person, and tonight she loved him in the old way. Just for a moment she wondered how she would feel now if there had been no crop. Would she and Jim be walking light-heartedly along a moonlit road looking for Pan? But this was not the time for disturbing conjecture. In past years she had grappled with enough crises that were real to justify her present avoidance of the imaginary.

She committed herself without thought to Jim's guidance and they walked steadily down the road, still arm in arm, Jim singing snatches of old songs, Norah silent and smiling by his side. Once he stopped and turning quickly, kissed her, and she responded joyously. Then they went on again until, looking back, they could no longer see the outlines of the house, only a tiny pin-point of light which they knew shone from the living-room window. When they turned down a little-used side-road the pin-point of light disappeared and they were cut off from the world of living things, isolated in the midst of a universe of remote and lonely stars.

"Jim," Norah said, "it's so quiet."

"You'd think the wind had given up," Jim said. "It can't be devil us any more so it's just quit."

"We beat it, didn't we? Beat the wind and the drought and the hail and the frost."

He laughed out loud as if he was not quite sure of himself. "This year," he said. "There are other years coming."

"It's no good, Jim," she said. "Tonight I won't think of next year. Remember what you said at supper? And honestly, I don't feel this way just because we have a crop and I'm going to get a piano. It's just that . . . well . . ."

She wanted to say, "It's because I'm walking in the moonlight with the man I love," but that way it sounded like something out of a Tin Pan Alley lyric. Anyhow, Jim seemed to understand the way she was feeling.

"I know," he said. "Even if we didn't have a crop we'd still have each other and the kid." And because of the way he said them the words did not seem trite at all.

The road-allowance along which they were walking ran along-

side a low ridge, a swelling of the earth's surface hardly apparent at a distance, but which now cut off on one side their view of the prairie. It pleased Norah that she could see a long way in three directions only; for the low ridge was in its indifferent way companionable. Not, of course, as the hills of Innishcoolin were companionable, but with a vague suggestion of intimacy not to be felt in the great stretches of plain which were the common view.

Presently the ridge merged with the level prairie and ceased altogether to be. Only a few hundred yards away the deserted Anderson house stood dark and silent, its blackness accentuated by a few bright streaks of light on the roof where the moon caught in its rays some strips of un-rusted metal. Norah, seeing the house without anticipation, turned quickly away. Jim stopped and slipped his arm about her waist.

"Sort of forbidding, isn't it?"

"Sort of."

She found the feel of his arm comforting, for she had experienced a profound sense of shock. But what she felt she could not put into words.

"Maybe I was wrong," Jim said, "about there being no ghosts in the West."

"The house always makes me feel queer," Norah said. "I wish Gail had burned it down."

She had told Jim what Gail said that day she found her in the house. Then Jim had said, "Silly idea. There's a lot of good lumber in that old hulk yet." But now, to her surprise, he was silent. In her apprehension she was prompted to tell him something else that Gail had said.

"Gail's an odd person. She doesn't think the way most people do about the land. She says the earth is hungry. Can you imagine? When it's given us eighteen thousand dollars' worth of wheat!"

"Gail has queer ideas sometimes," Jim agreed. But that was all. No flat contradiction of Gail's words; no confirmation of what Norah wanted to believe.

"Funny thing," Jim went on presently. "In the Old Country I always felt, when things happened—bombing raids, things like that,

I mean—that they were easier to take over there. Pain . . . sorrow . . .”

He spoke stumbingly, unsure of himself, and Norah knew that he was embarrassed. “And death. Death most of all. Because over there you feel that all these things are old—ten thousand years old at least. There wasn’t anything men put up with during the war that they hadn’t put up with before. The agents were different, that was all. But here everything is new. And you always figure, somehow, that when you start all over again with a clean slate things will be different, easier, that the real calamities won’t hit you. But it doesn’t work out that way. You can’t get away from pain and hardship and death, but subconsciously you think you can. And when you find out that you’re wrong, it hurts.”

Norah shivered and was quiet. All the time he had been talking Jim was leading her back along the road so that the ridge had reappeared, cutting the Anderson house off from sight. Now stumbingly they crossed the shallow dry ditch of the roadside and stood in the black shadow of the ridge, an isthmus of darkness bounded on three sides by moonlight. Before Norah knew what was happening Jim had slipped the coat from her shoulders and laid it on the grass. He lifted her in his arms and kissed her lightly.

“I’ve never made love to you in the moonlight before,” he said.

Afterwards, she knew that she would remember this night always. Not for the uniqueness of the experience, but for its significance. Once before, when her world had literally tumbled in ruins about her and she was lost and helpless, she had cried out in her agony for the security of the flesh. And Jim had answered her. This time, when the fear was felt so obscurely that she herself was hardly aware of it, he had comforted her unasked. For what he had done was not in satisfaction of strong physical desire—his love-making had been strangely without passion—but in response to her inarticulate demand for the security of his love. She walked home by his side, quiet and subdued but inwardly triumphant. In their union the spirit and the flesh had at last been made one.

CHAPTER 10

THE DRESS PLEASED NORAH MOST OF ALL. SHE SAT IN THE LITTER of a score of parcels, great and small, beside the Christmas tree, uttering little cries of delight as she looked at it lying in the big flat box. Then jumping to her feet she shook out the folds of the dress and measured its size with practised eye. It was right, she knew, right in every way—size, colour, cut. Cut most of all. Bright red, with a deep, deep neckline, no trimming anywhere, it was classic in its deceptive simplicity.

"But, Jim," she said wondering, "however did you find it—in Twin Buttes?"

"I didn't," Jim said proudly. "I sent away East for it. Personal shopping service. Gave them your size, told them what I wanted."

"But it must have cost a fortune!"

"My secret," he grinned.

Still holding the dress—tenderly, because it was a great possession—she slid her arm about his neck and drew his face close to her own. "You're a wonderful man, Jim. I keep finding out things about you. All nice. Marvellous!"

"You're wasting adjectives," he said. "Merry Christmas, Norah."

He kissed her and she dropped the dress to the floor so that he could hold her close. "Merry Christmas, Jim. And God bless us every one."

But they were not permitted to prolong their kisses, for now Phillip rushed across the room with shrill cries, and in sheer ecstasy of excitement began to pummel Jim and Norah indiscriminately.

"Santa came, Mummy!" he shouted. "Hi, Daddy—Santa came!"

"He did indeed, Phillip," Norah said, and reached down to pat his curly head. But already Phillip had slipped beyond her reach

and back to the wonderful wind-up train that ran on real tracks round and round, shedding sparks all the way, the train which had come miraculously in the night, the gift of a being far more wonderful than God.

"We'll remember this time," Norah said. "Always."

Jim thrust his hands deep into the pockets of the new plaid dressing-gown which was Norah's gift to him. "A good time, Norah," he said. "The best yet, I think."

"The best yet," Norah echoed, and picking up the dress fell to musing. Day-dreaming, Aunt Lucy had called this habit of hers, with acerbity. "You're an ingrown child," she had told Norah once. Ingrown was a better word, Norah had thought much later, than introvert, which Aunt Lucy would have despised as witless modern jargon.

Christmas in the old land had always been a promise, never a fulfilment. It was hard not to feel the spirit of the time, hard not to dream strange and wonderful things in an atmosphere so charged with magic as that of Christmas. But the day itself was always drab and disappointing. Not because there were only a few gifts, and, except for her father's, always practical: navy-blue woollen bloomers, hand-knitted gloves, much too large, which she would 'grow into', a sewing-basket; these were some of the things she remembered,—but because the old stone house was hostile to the festive spirit, driving it out with the whips of age and silence and gloom; so that the poor paper wreaths and the sprigs of holly and mistletoe which Norah, in spite of Aunt Lucy's unspoken disapproval, always hung in the living-room window, were each year a mockery and a reproach. "Why did you put us here?" they seemed to say. Norah usually took them down the day after Christmas, crying a little bit as she laid them away in an old chest in one of the attic rooms.

There was always, of course, a big dinner at night, a feast centred around the turkey or goose which Uncle James never failed to send from Innishcoolín, and which Aunt Lucy accepted and helped to eat with grateful condescension. And always, somehow, even in the last bitter years, Aunt Lucy found pennies enough for a bottle of cheap port or sherry which Norah's father drank scornfully because there was nothing else. There were never any guests at dinner, unless

the ghosts of Captain Anstruther Brandon and his bride who was the niece of Richard Brinsley Sheridan hovered somewhere unseen beyond the range of candlelight. But if they came they made no noises of good cheer.

A strange company they must have made: Aunt Lucy at the head of the table, bolt upright in rusty black, a cameo brooch her only ornament, speaking rarely in her precise clear voice; Norah's father sitting across the table—he would not sit at the foot because he hated to face Aunt Lucy—remote as always, peering discontentedly through rheumy eyes at the plate in front of him, eating in tentative nibbles without appetite but licking his lips all the time; and herself the only thing in the picture that changed from year to year, a little girl at first in an incredible starched white frock with wide blue sash, the kind you saw nowadays only in Victorian lithographs, the last time a woman grown, earning her way, but feeling still a little girl, afraid of Aunt Lucy, perplexed, lonely and unhappy.

"You're dreaming, Norah," Jim said. "Come and help me with the dishes."

She put away the dress and Jim's other gifts: exquisite lingerie, the most luxurious she had ever possessed, even the ordering of which must have cost Jim a blush; an alligator bag; books; records for the new combination radio-gramophone—good records all of them, Beethoven's *Fifth* and the *Emperor Concerto*, a Mozart *Quintet* and the Bach *Double Concerto* for violins. And there was a box of handkerchiefs, real Irish linen, and two Beleck cups and saucers from Uncle James. He had written her a letter, too—Uncle James, who, she believed, had hardly written a letter in all his life before. There were two pages of statistics: births, marriages and deaths; and a sprig of heather was enclosed. Norah was strangely touched. She had always got along well enough with Uncle James, but like most of the Brandons he was not given to wearing his heart on his sleeve. The letter, she knew, represented much suffering on his part for her sake.

But she must stop dreaming, for there were guests coming for dinner. When Jim had proposed to invite Weary River and Brian Malory, Norah had protested strongly.

"But Jim," she said, "Weary and Brian have nothing at all in common."

"Except good appetites," Jim said.

"But they'll be invited to other places—the Cliffs, the McKinleys . . ."

"Sure they'll be invited other places, but I know that Weary would rather come here than go anywhere else. He told me so. And I thought Brian would be good company for you."

That way he had disarmed her completely. She could no longer object to Weary, who had flattered her by thus bluntly stating his preference, and Jim in his innocence looked upon Malory as a special catch for her benefit. So she had said, "Yes," lightly. And in a few hours they would be here, here in her own home on this first Christmas day, the first real Christmas of her life. She put the dress away in her cupboard, the lingerie in her bureau drawer, and hurried down to the kitchen where Jim was already half-way through the breakfast dishes.

And when the few short hours had passed and the day was hurrying to its close, everything was ready. Norah drew the new heavy drapes across the living-room windows, because now in winter she more than ever wanted to shut out the night,—even the twilight, though Jim chided her with good-humoured persistence—and looked about the room with pride. To be sure the over-stuffed chesterfield was still filling a large part of the floor and wall space, but she had had it covered in materials to go with the drapes—greens and russets mostly—so that its colour at least was no longer an offence to the eye. There was a good rug on the floor, and a piano. Not a baby grand; but a diminutive upright, 'apartment size', in light-coloured wood, of small but beautiful tone. Norah hadn't practised much since she got it. Mostly, it seemed, she played nursery rhymes for Phillip, who liked to sing "Ba Ba Black Sheep" and "Mary had a Little Lamb" in a flat monotone to her accompaniment. It was strange how quickly your fingers stiffened, with housework and no practice. The *Appassionata*, which she had once played rather well, was now quite beyond her. But she thumped out Chopin's *Military Polonaise* with confidence, because Jim liked it and in a piece like that blurred notes didn't

matter so much. Perhaps she would play it tonight if anyone asked her.

It had been a good day, surprisingly a tranquil day, for Phillip, overcome by the sudden accession of toys and picture-books, had, after a brief period of wild enthusiasm, been quiet and preoccupied since early morning. The serenity of the household was, so Norah thought, no more than a reflection of her own mood. She looked forward to seeing Malory without perturbation. She was beyond his reach now, not because she had a piano and a rug, but because she had found Jim, the real Jim who until now had somehow eluded her.

Tonight, even with Malory present, there would be no disquieting thoughts to trouble her. Tonight was a triumph of the spirit. Not just the Christmas spirit, though she felt that too as never at any previous time, but one more subtly wrought and more enduring. It was as if this night were an ineradicable mark in the pattern of her life, the point at which she could say with assurance. "I am not afraid any longer." Happiness, security, love, these things were hers. And of these the last could never be taken from her.

She left Phillip in Jim's charge and went upstairs to dress. Because the day had significance far beyond the ordinary she made, as if in its honour, a ritual of dressing, taking far more time over her toilet than usual, even for special occasions. She put on the fine new underwear, rich with gossamer lace and ribbon, hopelessly impractical on a prairie farm, hence all the more to be cherished, and called Jim and Phillip to admire her. New nylons next, and then the dress, such a dress as she had never before owned, not even when in a fit of recklessness which horrified Aunt Lucy and won her father's unspoken approval she had spent everything saved from her first three months' salary on a frock which had caught and held her fancy. It had been a fine dress surely, one she had loved, and worn till it was shabby and threadbare, but not to be compared with this, a dress such as had never been seen in Twin Buttes before, not even on Gail Anderson. She made up her face with the same care she had taken in dressing: lipstick, mascara (no rouge at all), so that the effect was in keeping with the dress—

dramatic, sophisticated, an effect which Jim would appreciate since there would be no other women present.

There were shoes to go with the gown, red shoes a perfect match in colour, with unbelievably high heels. And for the first time since coming to the West Norah put on her pearls, a single strand fastened with an old-fashioned filigree clasp, which Aunt Lucy had given her on her twenty-first birthday. They had been in the family for ages and were valuable. Now for the first time in her life she had a dress to set them off. And I set the dress off, she told herself with pride, looking at her reflection in the full-length mirror (a recent purchase) which hung inside the cupboard door.

She heard voices below and knowing that Brian and Weary had arrived, hastened to complete her toilet. But when she was ready she did not at once go down; instead, sitting before the dresser mirror she fell to dreaming, not about things related to her own immediate life but about her ancestors of a long time past, about Captain Anstruther Brandon of the Royal Inniskillings and his beautiful young bride who was Norah's great-great-grandmother. Had the niece of Richard Brinsley Sheridan ever sat thus on a Christmas night knowing that soon the eyes of many men would be upon her, eyes filled with admiration, with lust, with love? Did she suspect then the treachery of the gods, who, having brought her to this high place of fortune were soon to ravage her beauty and crush her spirit with anguish greater than the heart could bear? Would there some day sit in an upper room of Armstrong House a girl, young, beautiful in a red dress, dreaming of her long-dead ancestors, James Armstrong who had built the house, his wife the lovely Norah Brandon of the Brandons of Innishcoolín, and their son Phillip who had done great things and brought honour to the family name? And if so, what would she remember? What tales and legends of these folk of a former and all-but forgotten generation? Would they be grave or gay? And thinking again of Captain Brandon and his bride, Norah shivered, and dismissing her maid with a bright smile and gesture she stood up, gathered the train of her gown about her, and went slowly down the wide marble stair-case and into the blaze of light which beat down from massive silver candelabra upon a sea of upturned faces below.

She stopped half-way down the stairs and stood for a moment smiling. "Hello, everybody," she said.

"Beatrix Esmond!" Jim said quickly. Norah laughed triumphantly because Jim had sensed her mood and was eager to share it.

"The shoes are right," Brian Malory said. "But Beatrix didn't wear a red dress."

Norah was annoyed. Brian sounded like a literary pedant haggling over a petty point of detail which had nothing to do with the spirit of the work under scrutiny. But she went to him, still smiling, and held out her hand.

"Merry Christmas, Brian."

His touch awakened no emotion in her. She greeted him as an acquaintance, a friend, knowing too that she would always feel towards him as she did now. Assurance gave her a sense of superiority. She forgave him for his clumsy dissipation of the mood which she and Jim had for a moment created and shared. Instead of irritation she felt only kindness. Kindness to Brian, to all men.

"Merry Christmas, Norah," Brian said. "You look like a goddess who treads on ether and disdains the dominion of stars."

"Yeats again?" she said.

"Mangan this time. Go to the foot of the class."

She laughed and brushed past him to where Weary Rivers, dressed in the unfamiliar glory of a shiny and spotted blue serge suit, was standing uncomfortably in the doorway between living-room and kitchen.

"I put that mistletoe over the door especially for you, Weary," she said. "You saw it right away, didn't you?" And before Weary had time to do more than utter a startled yelp she put her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. "Merry Christmas, Weary."

Weary's face turned a characteristic brick-red. But the ultimate triumph was his. "Thank you, Norah," he said, and to her astonished delight reached over and bestowed a dignified peck in return. Jim and Brian roared with glee at the expression of bewilderment on Norah's face, and even Weary allowed a slow grin to wrinkle up his leathery cheeks. "I'd be a heller with women if I'd let myself

go," he said, and retired at once to the chesterfield, for the first time in his life complete master of a social situation.

The dinner was, in Malory's words, a culinary masterpiece. Norah sat at the head of the table, Jim at the foot, Weary and Phillip side by side with Brian across from them. The turkey was brown and tender, the vegetables (peas and carrots from Wong Lee's frozen foods refrigerator) delicate and savoury; the plum pudding, so Weary assured Norah, the very finest ever seen in the West. Only the blazing brandy which surrounded the pudding as Jim bore it from kitchen to table perturbed him, but he was comforted by Norah's assurance that the bottle was still more than three-quarters full.

"Gives it flavour," he conceded, after his first mouthful. "Only too spread out."

Yet Norah did not feel that the dinner was wholly a success. True, Phillip's manners, usually riotous at meal-times, were beyond all praise; Jim was happy and proud—proud of *her*, she knew, and the knowledge as always pleased her; and even Weary forgot himself so far as to tell two stories of the early days, neither of which seemed to have much point. But Brian Malory was reserved, even morose. He ate little, though he praised Norah's cooking extravagantly, and took almost no part in the conversation. He looked thinner, Norah thought, than when she had last seen him, months and months ago it seemed, and a good deal older. The hair above his temples was quite grey now, and the lines in his face seemed to have deepened perceptibly.

Norah felt sorry for Brian. He was a man without roots, an exile from a homeland which no longer had much meaning for him, in reality. There was an odd phrase which persisted in her memory, a phrase used by the blonde in the dressing-room at Paradise Vale to describe Malory. Phony Irish she had called him. Norah wondered now as she had many times in the past if the phrase was apt. She did not like to think so. All Irishmen were sentimentalists, more so than their women, in spite of the Countess Marcievicz and that tall passionate rebel who Yeats had loved—Maude Gonne, that was her name. Perhaps, as the blonde had hinted, there was no reason at all why Brian couldn't go home; perhaps his exile was self-imposed, the rumours about his activities with the illegal Irish Republican Army self-created. But one's homeland was important

as it existed in the mind. Whatever his reasons, Malory was instinctively wise not to go back. For in doing so he would destroy those illusions which twenty years of exile had created and magnified, illusions which were, Norah suspected, the compensation making his present drab existence tolerable.

Tonight it seemed that his surly ill-humour was aggravated by the spectacle of Norah's happiness. Six months ago they had been furtive compatriots in exile, railing against the weather, the landscape, the people, recalling with tears not altogether forced the mists and the twisty roads of Ireland and the smell of peat bogs on a damp spring morning. She still thought of these things often, but no longer with real regret. She suspected that Malory knew what her feelings now were, and the knowledge was in part responsible for his moodiness. Feeling sorry for him, feeling that in some obscure way she was partly to blame, though unwittingly, for his ill-humour, she tried to draw him out, but he retorted upon her with a point-blank attack.

"You're quite the little Westerner now, Norah," he said. "In spite of your fine clothes."

No more than that. But his words were in effect a dismissal. She no longer mattered to him, no more perhaps than the blonde who had called him phony Irish, and a good deal less than Gail Anderson. Norah was piqued.

"Aren't you glad?" she said.

Malory took a long drink from the glass at his elbow and did not answer. Jim chuckled.

"Quite a change in six months all right," he said in a pleased way. "You were a foreigner last spring."

For a fleeting moment Norah felt moved to indignant protest. Jim was being smug. But she saw that Malory was smiling covertly and the protest died on her lips. It was Christmas night, and she turned the talk to other things.

After dinner the men washed the dishes while Norah, wearing a huge cover-all apron over her new dress, got Phillip ready for bed. Surprisingly he did not demur when she told him that it was time to go upstairs. It had been a very long though wonderful day and he was tired. Tired, and in a way wholly beyond his comprehension,

disappointed. "I wish Christmas was tomorrow, Mummy," he said wistfully, just before kneeling down in his cot to say his prayers.

Norah felt a lump rise in her throat. She knew what he meant, how he felt. In spite of the toys, the wonderful, wonderful toys, the gaudy picture-books, the candy, tomorrow would be colourless and without zest. For the magic which invested the days before Christmas and above all Christmas Eve would have faded into the light of common day. Without the magic nothing would be the same.

That was the way of life, too, Norah thought philosophically, holding Phillip tight in her arms. There were minutes, hours, days even, which because of a glance exchanged, a word spoken, an act trivial or momentous performed, were transfigured by an enchantment which made all other moments of time seem stale and unprofitable. And the trouble was these great experiences could never be re-lived in the flesh, and only tentatively in memory. No matter what the poet said, emotion recollected in tranquillity was a pale shadow of the experience itself. And now, holding Phillip close, she remembered that once she had been sure that no one could ever mean as much to her as Jim did. But Phillip meant as much. And it wasn't because he was a part of Jim—nothing complicated like that at all. Just because he was a small boy who lived with her and Jim and depended wholly on them, a small boy who made endless work and uttered loud noises interminably, who was clean for only three or four brief moments of the day, and who saw the world in a way no adult could possibly comprehend except on those rare occasions when unwittingly he managed to communicate to you lightning glimpses of the wonders that he saw.

"I guess Santa's awful tired tonight," Phillip said, trying vicariously to share the physical experiences of his god.

"I'll bet Mrs. Santa has him tucked in bed with something to keep him nice and warm," Norah said, secure in the knowledge of the hot-water bottle she had slipped between Phillip's sheets a few minutes earlier. "And tomorrow he'll have a sleep-in and a good rest. The day after tomorrow he'll start work for next Christmas."

"I wish it was next Christmas already," Phillip said. He put his hands on Norah's shoulders and laid his head against her breast.

"Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep—amen."

Norah hadn't taught him the other lines of the prayer which she herself had repeated when a small child: "If I should die before I wake, I pray Thee Lord, my soul to take." She had read in a book of child psychology that intimations of death, even in prayer, frightened children. She herself couldn't remember having been unduly disturbed by the words, indeed they had always given her a comforting sense of security, but perhaps the psychologists were right. Anyway, she wouldn't teach the lines to Phillip.

Usually after she had tucked the bedclothes in securely she left him at once. But tonight she sat down by the cot and sang Phillip's favourite Mother Goose rhymes the way he liked, in a very low voice. Partly because she didn't want to go down just yet, for Malory's attitude oppressed her, partly because she knew that Phillip was over-tired and nervous. But soon his eyes closed and he was asleep, one hand beneath his head in the quaint pose he nearly always fell into, the other lying on the quilt, a cap-gun held tightly in its grasp. The cap-gun was a gift from Weary, and it had been almost as successful as the wind-up train. Every room in the house was permeated with the faintly acrid smell of burnt powder.

Norah kissed Phillip gently on the forehead. He was a good-looking little boy, she thought, with fine regular features and a well-formed body. He was bright, too, so that he was beginning life with no great handicaps and many advantages. Things should go smoothly enough for him. He would get a good education: high school, university, a professional training if he wanted it. But if he didn't there would always be a home, a good home, for him on the farm. She was sure that he would be popular with people—girls, anyway. And smiling self-consciously at her dreams of his future she pulled down the blind in his room, switched off the light and went slowly downstairs.

The men had finished the dishes and were deep in a game of three-handed cribbage. They put their cards away when Norah joined them, and she protested. "But you were enjoying yourselves!"

"Putting in time waiting for you," Jim explained. "We're going to have some music now. Weary brought along his guitar."

Norah didn't like guitar music very much, but she admitted to herself that it made a wholly appropriate accompaniment to the songs which Weary sang for an hour or more in a low, surprisingly rich voice. They were cowboy songs mostly: *The Old Chisholm Trail*, *Sweet Betsy of Pike*, *As I Went Down to Laredo*—true folk-songs composed by the men who generations ago had driven their cattle across the prairies and herded them nightly under the stars. The cowboys sang at night, so Jim had told her, to keep the cattle quiet. The airs were mostly in a minor key, some of them familiar, but the words were all new to her. And there was one song she knew she would never forget, the most haunting and poignant of all the Western ballads, *The Dying Cowboy*, which affected her in the same way as did the more familiar Gaelic folk-songs, like them sung in a minor key, the words crude and prosaic, yet instinct with the intolerable anguish at the centre of life—"the heart-break at the heart of things", a poet called it:

*Oh bury me not on the lone prairie
In a narrow grave just six by three,
Where the coyotes howl and the wind blows free
Oh bury me not on the lone prairie.*

But they had buried him on the lone prairie just the same. In spite of herself Norah shivered. Weary put away his guitar.

"That song always gives me the willies," he said. "I keep on singin' it, though."

He turned to Norah. "I been hoggin' the show, Norah," he said. "Figger it's your turn."

"That's right," Malory said. "Let's hear something civilized."

But Norah did not condemn him for thus rudely dismissing Weary's songs. She knew that like herself he had been strangely affected, and the knowledge strengthened the sympathy which she felt for him, a rootless wanderer between two worlds, rejected by the old, ill at ease in the new.

She played the *Military Polonaise* and Brahms' *Sixth Hungarian Dance*, and, in answer to a surprising request from Weary, the war-horse, *Finlandia*. She didn't have the music but the piece had been a favourite of her father's, so that she was able to play most of it

from memory, improvising rather clumsily whenever her memory failed her. Jim watched her proudly all the time. He himself was able to pick out a few pieces by ear, and her comparative control of the key-board never failed to arouse his wondering admiration.

She played only the three pieces. "Now if you'll excuse me," she said, "we'll hear some real music."

Jim put the recording of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, which was one of his gifts to Norah, on the automatic player, and for half an hour they listened to the stormy music which the inspired baton of a great conductor drew from a great orchestra. No one said much after the last record had been played. Even Weary, to whom a symphony was a profound mystery, seemed awed into silence. But presently Jim said prosaically, "What about a cup of coffee, Norah?" and with a start of surprise she saw that the time was after midnight.

"My goodness, yes," she said, and hurrying out to the kitchen prepared coffee and a great platter of sandwiches. When she returned to the living-room with the lunch, Jim and Brian Malory were arguing about something, almost with heat.

"What do you think, Norah?" Brian demanded.

Norah set down the tray of sandwiches and coffee on a side-table and began to fill cups. "About what, Brian?"

Malory sat forward on the edge of his chair, hands on knees, bristling and aggressive. Very Irish at the moment, Norah thought. "We've been building Armstrong House, Jim and I. And I say that you've got to move over to the river. Buy a quarter on the bank, running right down to the water if the land is laid out that way—two quarters if you need them. Then you'll have a view with some variety in it: prairie on three sides, valley and river in front. Your living-room will face the river—you'll have a view window, of course. Jim can commute to his land here. He'll own a helicopter by the time he's ready to build Armstrong House."

The heat with which Malory spoke disturbed Norah. He was not joking; and he was not just arguing about the proposed site of a house. Some principle was involved, for the time obscured by irrelevancies.

"Cream and sugar, Brian?" she said.

"Both," he grunted.

He took the cup from her hand. "I see you've had the grace to get some real china," he said, holding up the fragile Beleck cup to the light so that the coffee showed dark below the semi-transparent rim.

"From Uncle James," Norah said. "He surprised me."

"The important thing is shelter," Jim said, passing the plate of sandwiches to Weary and Brian. "The soil is light along the valley, on the top anyway. All the growth is down the sides. You couldn't grow a twenty-foot wind-break there, and that's what you have to have in this country."

"God in Heaven, listen to the man!" Malory groaned. "You'd shut your wife in behind a twenty-foot hedge so that she'd have to walk a hundred yards for a breath of air and a bit of view! You'll be all right, of course, out in the open all day."

"If the wind-break helps to keep the dust out I'm all for it," Norah interrupted. "When the wind blows I'm so busy trying to keep the house clean I haven't any time to enjoy the view."

Malory looked at her morosely. "You're a little Westerner now, Norah. I was afraid this would happen."

"What's the matter with being a Westerner?" Jim's voice was mild, but there was a rare dull flush in his cheeks.

Norah intervened quickly. "I want two bathrooms," she said, "As well as a wind-break. Bathrooms with tubs and showers."

Malory threw up his hands. "And to think the words I spoke in jest just now should be turned back on me this way! Norah, you're a real one hundred per cent dyed-in-the-wool American."

"You haven't told us yet what's wrong with being a Westerner." Jim's voice had a little edge in it.

Malory did not give him a direct answer. "You know," he said, "I've thought many a time that if I were a composer I'd like to create a great new symphony. The 'American Dream' I'd call it. And it wouldn't be quite like anything else on earth."

"I can believe that," Jim said.

His heavy sarcasm annoyed Norah. "Sounds exciting," she said prosaically.

"The 'American Dream', that's what I'd call it. But it wouldn't

be like most dreams. I'd make it come true—it *is* coming true—every day. All the way from Alaska to the Rio Grande, from Vancouver to the Atlantic. They're all dreaming the same thing—Canadians, Yanks—east, west, north, south. It's the one thing that gives this continent unity. A dream, an ideal."

He sat back in his chair and stabbed a pipe-cleaner through the stem of his pipe. "I'll borrow, of course. Everything except the theme. That'll be all my own. And it'll run through all four movements."

"You won't let slavish adherence to conventional form hinder you," Norah said, refilling his cup.

Malory shot her a quick glance, half-humorous, half-suspicious. "Don't speak lightly of the great work of my life, Norah. This is serious."

"Tell us some more about it," Norah said.

"It's a great pity I don't know anything about music. The conception is vast, dynamic. But I'll borrow. The first movement will be mostly Bach, I think. *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*—things like that."

"The Pilgrim Fathers," Jim said.

"Exactly. The men of faith. The second movement will be the revolution. *Finlandia* and the last movement of Beethoven's *Fifth* synthesized. Can you imagine? With perhaps a subordinate theme, melancholy but spirited, for the United Empire Loyalists."

"A few bars of *God Save the King* would do the trick," Norah suggested.

Malory shook his head. "The Yanks would miss the point. They'd think it was *My Country 'Tis of Thee*. We'll use something else. *Land of Hope and Glory*, maybe—the supreme irony."

He paused to gulp a mouthful of coffee. "The third movement is clear, absolutely clear, in my mind. Galloping horses, gun-fire, *John Brown's Body* and westward the course of empire and the Gettysburg address—you know what I mean. And, of course, *Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie*. All the ambition and pride and greatness of a continent. What a theme! My God, I wish I knew something about music!"

"How does it end?" Norah asked.

"Well, the fourth movement will be a bit of a let-down at first. Lush to begin with, say Siegfried's *Love Idyll* as it might be played by Morton Gould. That's for the era of the big tycoons, you know—Diamond Jim Brady—people like that. The *Stars and Strips Forever* and *Yes, We Have No Bananas* a bit later. A few soap opera themes cunningly interwoven . . ."

"But what about the main theme?" Norah said.

"That's my original contribution. It's the whole symphony really—the American Dream. It runs all the way through, but just for a bar or two in the first movement, very faint and far away. Louder, more persuasive in the second, and you hear it several times. Louder still in the third, much louder. And it's familiar—but not as an air. You know it *means* something, but you're not quite sure what. Not until the fourth. Then it really takes over. Louder and louder, until in the last half it *is* the symphony. The great American Dream—that's what it is. And all of a sudden you know the sound. You've heard it a thousand times—the dream in music—great music—the soul of America—swelling into a magnificent crescendo . . ."

"*Yankee Doodle Dandy*," Weary said unexpectedly.

Malory paid no heed to the interruption. He was on his feet now, arms flung wide.

"Water!" he said. "That's what it is—water! Water flushing down a toilet bowl!"

His voice rose in a great shout. "The American Dream. Indoor plumbing in every home!"

Nobody said anything at all. Malory shrugged his shoulders and sat down. "I might have known you wouldn't think much of it."

"But Brian," Norah said, "indoor plumbing is important. Honestly."

"But it's not the ultimate ideal," he said, almost angrily. "Only we've made it that. Oh, I'm not talking literally, of course. But here in the West and all over the continent—here in the West most of all—we're developing the most materialistic society on earth. There isn't a man within a hundred miles of us whose land means a

thing to him as land; it's a source of revenue to be exploited to the limit. And when the time comes he'll let the wind scatter his land all over the prairie and never bat an eye, so long as he's been able to turn all that was good in it into cash and Buicks. And he works so hard for the cash and the Buick that he has no time for anything else—no time till he's old and then it's too late. No time to read books, no time to think. Neither has his wife. No time to listen to music, except Charlie McCarthy and the soap operas. No time for anything except the movies and ball-games. And every so often the government sends us smart lads with college degrees from the cities to give us pep-talks on culture, and that's the biggest laugh of all. We haven't the slightest interest in culture unless we can make money out of it, and we haven't any folk-lore. Never will have! Sure, we Westerners are hospitable and courageous and humane and all that sort of thing. And we never let the rest of the world forget it either, because we've nothing else to play up. We're shiftless and rootless. Shiftless in the worst possible way, for we're a people without anything to pass on to the next generation. Not a book or a picture or a symphony. Or a faith!"

"I haven't got me a Buick," Weary said.

Norah laughed. Malory stared at her angrily. "But I'm forgetting," he said. "Of course, we'll have something to pass on to posterity. Indoor plumbing."

To Norah's surprise and relief, Jim did not contradict Malory directly. "We're young yet, Brian," he said. "Give us time."

"Do you really believe that?" Malory challenged.

Jim shook his head. "I'm not sure what I believe. I guess there's plenty wrong with us Westerners. There is with most people, including the Irish. Maybe we don't go after the right things, maybe we have lost some things we should have kept."

"You mean?" Malory said.

"I'm not sure," Jim repeated. "When I was a kid the farm meant something. It was part of the community. Now the community is gone. But the way I look at it, Brian, you've got to have material comforts here if you're going to survive. I don't blame

the farmers, the old people especially, for packing up. In the East, in the Old Country, life is a lot more comfortable somehow. Not in the sense that people have more things, maybe. But living, just living, is a lot pleasanter. People are close together, their surroundings are beautiful—easy to live with—the climate soft by our standards. The West is a tough country, Brian. Here you're on the defensive all the time."

Jim was repeating what Norah had thought many times. "Jim's right, Brian," she said quickly. "We have to fight all the time."

"But you choose the wrong weapons," Brian said.

Suddenly he seemed to lose interest in the discussion. "I'd better be going," he said, almost listlessly. "I think I've used up my supply of Christmas spirit."

He looked tired and vaguely unhappy. Like Phillip, Norah thought, when she had tucked him into bed.

"Why don't you and Weary stay the night?" she said. "One of you can sleep in the den, one on the chesterfield."

Malory shook his head. "Weary can stay if he likes," he said, "I'm for the trail. Thanks very much, Norah."

He rode away soon afterwards, accompanied by a reluctant but loyal Weary. Norah watched from the living-room window till they were out of sight.

"I'm sorry for Brian," she said to Jim, who was gathering up the lunch dishes. "He seemed unhappy tonight."

"Maybe he's in love again," Jim said.

Norah looked at him suspiciously, but his face was serene.

"With Gail Anderson?" she said.

"I wonder," Jim said. "He used to be. Funny business that. I know they still see quite a lot of each other. But things seem to have cooled off some. I wonder why?"

Norah ate a dill pickle without relish. "It would be hard, I think, for a man not to be in love with Gail Anderson. She's so beautiful."

Jim did not make any comment just then. But later, lying by

her side in bed, he spoke drowsily. "I don't think Gail Anderson likes you much."

Norah was startled. "But why shouldn't she?"

Jim turned over and buried his face in the pillow. "That's what I can't figure out," he said.

He fell asleep soon afterwards. But Norah lay awake for a long time. When at last she dozed off, her sleep was restless and broken. For the ghosts which she had laid but a short time before were walking again, and their footfalls disturbed her dreams.

CHAPTER II

THE MOMENT JIM HUNG UP THE TELEPHONE RECEIVER AND turned to her, Norah knew that something was wrong. "Jim," she said quickly, "what's the matter?"

"It's Dad. They just phoned out the telegram from the station."

"Is . . . is he . . ."

Jim shook his head. "He's pretty sick. Heart attack, I guess. We'll have to go right away. He says he wants to see me. And there isn't much time."

Norah stood beside the table, the dishcloth with which she had been wiping the top still in her hand. It was hard to think clearly when the news was so unexpected. Jim's father hadn't meant very much to her. He was a remote shadowy being whom she had never seen in the flesh, only in faded snapshots, living far away at the Coast. Letters came from him once in a while, a page or two covered with words in thin, spidery handwriting. There was never anything of interest in the letters; a paragraph or two about the weather, perhaps word of an old neighbour whom he had seen, something irrelevant about the price of wheat, and always the same conclusion, "I am fine and hope you are all the same." Now he was dying, alone, and Jim must go to him at once. She knew that there were no other near relations.

She made up her mind quickly and spoke with unusual decision. "Jim, you don't need me. We couldn't find a place to stay very easily, and Phillip has a bad cold. The trip might be serious for him."

He looked at her in a troubled kind of way, his eyes apprehensive. "But I can't leave you here," he said. "Not by yourself."

“Jim, what nonsense!” She spoke with animation, almost with sharpness. “Why can’t you leave Phillip and me? You’ll have enough to worry about without the two of us tagging along.”

“More to worry about if you stay behind.”

She spoke slowly now, trying to reason with him. “It’s too bad, Jim, but Phillip just isn’t fit to travel. You know that. And if we all went you’d have to make hotel reservations in advance. We couldn’t go unless we knew we had a place to stay. And you must go at once.”

He sat down and drummed on the table-top with his fingers. “But it’s winter, Norah, and there’s more snow predicted. You’ll be shut in, by yourself, for a week. Maybe more. It depends, And it just won’t do.”

He spoke without much conviction. Norah pressed her point. “We’ll be all right,” she reiterated. “What if we are shut in? There’s nothing to do, no chores . . .”

It wasn’t just that Jim’s plan was wholly impracticable with Phillip under the weather and no assurance of a place to stay at the other end. There was another and more subtle reason which for the moment Norah refused consciously to recognize, though it was helping to dictate her protest. For the thought was in her mind, unacknowledged as yet, that here at last was the chance to prove to Jim her ability to meet a crisis, to meet it without fear or vacillation, a crisis in its way more significant, because it was likely to be prolonged, than any other she had yet encountered.

“Phillip isn’t fit to travel,” she repeated. “And in a boarding-house or hotel—even if we found one to take us in—I couldn’t give him the attention he needs.”

She had a moment of panic when Jim said, “I’d have liked Dad to see him.” But he added almost at once, “It’s too late for that now.”

“I’m sorry, Jim,” Norah said.

Presently he nodded his head, slowly, as if he had not quite made up his mind. “You’re right, I guess. And I’ll have to go. But I hate leaving you, Norah. You don’t know yet what winter on the prairie can be like. We’re just getting into the worst part of it.”

"Jim," Norah said, smiling, "you're the one who's read too many novels. We're not living in pioneer days. Not with the car, the radio, the telephone, neighbours just around the corner."

He smiled unhappily at her vehemence. "But I just can't help worrying."

"Of course, Jim," she said. "I know how you feel. But you must go and Phillip and I must stay behind. We have to face the facts. And they're not really so terrible."

Jim got up quickly. She knew that now he had made up his mind. "I'll run over and see Brian. I think the road to his place is still open."

"But whatever for?"

"I'll ask him to drop around as often as he can—keep an eye on you. You'll need things and you won't be able to get to town, maybe, if it snows any more. Brian will be pleased. Be something for him to do."

She started at that. "Not Brian, Jim, please! Ask Weary Rivers."

He was surprised and a little taken aback. "But Brian's nearer, only three miles. He'd like to come. And he'll be good company. Weary's a fine guy but he never has anything to say."

"I know, Jim," Norah said, embarrassed now by her outburst, and the necessity of accounting for it. "It's just that . . . that I don't much like being under an obligation to Brian. With Weary it's different. All I have to do to restore the balance with him is to give him a few good meals. But you can't repay Brian that way."

Jim did not seem to understand. "Brian won't figure he's doing us any favours. We're not asking him to do chores. And he'll enjoy a good meal just as much as Weary. Honestly, Norah, it wouldn't be easy for Weary the roads the way they are. He's getting old."

Norah checked the words with which she had been about to interrupt him. For of a sudden she knew that she was up to her old trick of evading an awkward issue. Could she admit that her newly-won assurance was not proof against something as intangible as a remembered kiss?

"You're quite right, Jim," she said quickly. "I'm being foolish. I suppose it was the way he behaved Christmas night that put me off Brian. Go and ask him now. I'll get your things ready for you."

"There's a train out at nine tonight," Jim said. "I can catch a plane in the city early in the morning. I'll see Dad at noon."

Still concerned, he came to her side of the table and put his arm around her shoulders. "Norah, I hate to leave you!"

She interrupted his words with a kiss. "I got along without you before," she said. "Not very well maybe, but I got along. Phillip and I will be all right."

He took his fur overcoat from its hook behind the kitchen door and put it on slowly, as if still not sure of his course of action. "I'll hurry," he said. "The road's pretty rough all the way to Brian's place, but I'll make it all right. I should be back in half an hour."

Norah watched the car from the living-room window till it was out of sight. Then she went upstairs to pack Jim's bag. Phillip, snuffling unhappily, followed her into the bed-room. His cold was worse, she thought, his nose running like a leaky tap.

"Poor old man," she whispered, and set him up on the bed, a pillow at his back, so that he could watch her in comfort. She opened Jim's leather gladstone bag and put in shirts, pyjamas, handkerchiefs, all the socks that were clean and without holes, for it would be hard to get laundry done in the city on short notice. He would want to shave before leaving so she left out his shaving kit. And all the time she was thinking, he's worried because he isn't sure of me, he's afraid I can't face things. But she was sure of herself now, even when thinking of Brian Malory. Particularly when thinking of Brian. Her attitude towards him had not changed since Christmas. He was someone to like and pity. No more than that. She was glad now that he would be coming every day or so. Already she was looking forward to seeing him, for there were so many things that they had in common, so many things to talk about. She would show him that she wasn't wholly a Westerner yet.

She was surprised that Jim had suggested Brian, even though logic seemed to be on his side. For the neighbours—Mrs. Cliff and Mrs. McKinley anyway, and what other neighbours were there?—would talk when they got to hear of it. But that was just like Jim. He had a high regard for public opinion, and a complete insensitivity to the things most likely to arouse it. No one disliked or

feared gossip more than he; yet in his innocence he was preparing to give the good ladies who were his neighbours a fine opportunity to talk scandal about his wife. But she would not enlighten him; she had made her protest on other grounds and he had ignored it. And she admitted to herself, half-ashamed, that the situation had in it a certain piquancy which she would not have wished away.

She would be lonely all right, but it would be a commonplace loneliness, the kind arising out of separation from something loved and familiar, not that more dreaded kind which had in it some element of fear, the kind you felt when you were by yourself in the middle of a great uninhabited space. That kind wasn't far away, perhaps, but it would be easy to keep it at bay, for she could shut out completely if need be the monotonous grey-white world—grey skies, white fields—lying beyond the limits of the four walls around her. Afterwards, when Jim was home again, the trust between them would be absolute. He would know then that he could depend on her.

She heard the car coming up the drive and hurried to finish packing. She met Jim as he came into the kitchen, stamping the snow from his heavy service boots.

"He'll come," Jim said briefly. "I'd better dress now." For already it was after six o'clock and quite dark outside.

Norah had intended to be cheerful and matter-of-fact at supper-time. But Jim sat sober-faced and withdrawn, thinking, she knew, of his father, and she did not like to break in upon his reverie. She wondered how much his father meant to him now, how much in the past. He had never talked about his father at all, and not often of his mother, though of her always with tenderness. Perhaps he blamed his father for what had happened to her. If so, all that would be forgotten now. His father was dying and the past did not matter. In the presence of death all animosity, if any existed, would vanish away.

Jim finished his meal hurriedly, leaving most of his apple pie (his favourite dessert) untouched. "Not much appetite tonight," he said. "We'd better be moving."

He stood up and pushed his chair back into place with unusual

and unnecessary deliberation. "Brian said a funny thing this afternoon."

Norah was suddenly apprehensive. "What was that?"

"He said he'd be glad to keep an eye on Caesar's wife."

Norah did not say anything. Jim patted Phillip abstractedly on the top of his curly head. "I wonder what he meant?"

"Caesar's wife was above suspicion," Norah said, hoping that Jim would not notice her burning cheeks. "He meant it as a compliment, I suppose. A pretty obvious sort of one for Brian."

"I guess I just haven't got a literary background," Jim said. "We did take *Julius Caesar* in high school but I'd forgotten."

Norah did not allow her feeling of vague disquiet to assert itself. There was a cynical streak in Brian; it must have amused him to be cryptic at Jim's expense. She wished now that she had insisted on Jim's asking Weary instead of Brian. But at least she would give Brian no cause to think of her as anyone other than Caesar's wife. Of that she was sure.

The road leading to the highway was rough with ruts cut deep into the snow. Norah drove—she had learned how, late in the summer—concentrating with painful intensity on the two tracks that showed in the headlights. On either side the snow was piled in the ditches to the height of the road, and where there were fences it rose in great drifts, almost, it seemed to Norah, as high as the top of the car. She was glad that Phillip, sitting between herself and Jim, kept up a steady inconsequential chatter, for Jim was silent, remote. She knew that he didn't want to talk, but silence would have been embarrassing tonight. He spoke only once before they reached the main highway.

"I'll call you up every night about supper-time," he said. "Don't be too far from the phone then."

The main highway had been cleared by the snow-plough; once on it Norah found driving easy. "I'll get home without any trouble," she said reassuringly. "I couldn't get out of those ruts if I wanted to."

"I know," Jim said. "It's afterwards I'm thinking about."

"I must be corrupting you, Jim," she said. "That's the way an Irishman talks. It's afterwards I'm thinking about."

But he would not be distracted from his thoughts. "You really don't need to lock up at night. But you'll probably sleep better if you do. And don't forget to check the pipe draughts before you go to bed."

"I'll remember," Norah promised. "I'm the one who usually sees to them anyway."

She drove down to the station and stopped at the edge of the wooden platform. The night was mild and there were loungers about, teen-age boys and girls mostly, drawn to the station because the passing-through of the passenger train was the one touch of drama in the monotonous pattern of the day. The railway was no longer, as it had been a generation ago, the only connecting link between the town and the great world outside the white circle of plain, for the highways were always open now; but it was the link most obvious and spectacular. Even on the coldest night there were always a few people at the station to watch the train come in.

It was hard waiting. There were so many things that Norah wanted to say to Jim, but she couldn't put any of them into words.

"I'm sorry about your Dad," she said conventionally, as if she were a casual acquaintance hearing the news for the first time.

"Funny thing," Jim said, "I'm just beginning to realize that I never knew him very well. After Mother died—I was just a little gaffer then, twelve I guess—he sort of lived to himself. I don't think he noticed me very much."

She had guessed that before. "You were lonely," she said.

"I was lonely. Bitter too, sometimes, whenever I thought about things. But now I remember some of the things I didn't think about then. He tried to be kind. But life had gone sour on him. I think at the last he hated the West."

"He never talked in his letters about coming back."

"Not even on a visit. Too many memories, all unpleasant. I'd figured we'd maybe drive out next summer. He'd have been pleased to see Phillip. You, too, of course."

Phillip had slid down from the seat and was standing in front

of the windshield, peering anxiously through a cleared space in the frosted glass to catch a glimpse of the incoming train. Jim, now sitting close beside Norah, reached out and took her gloved hand in his.

"It's not going to happen to us, Norah, what happened to Dad and Mother. She was like you in some ways—a lot of ways. I don't think Dad ever really understood how she looked at things. Christmas night Brian made me pretty mad talking the way he did about the West. I was just going to pitch into him when all of a sudden it struck me—about Mother, I mean. She'd have understood what he was talking about. Her values were different from those of most people out here. But they were good; I know that. And she didn't last."

Norah laughed shakily. "Don't you think I will?"

"You'll be all right, Norah. I think I take after my mother. Folks always said so, anyway. No matter what happens I'll see to it you never have to go through what she did. Things have changed in the last ten years."

Norah knew that Jim had not meant to hurt her, but she could not help feeling that he had been a little less than fair. Then her thoughts ran quickly over the past, over the times when there had been trouble, occasionally great trouble, and the recollection gave her a small shock. She hadn't always faced up to things, she knew, but she hadn't understood before how depressing the cumulative total of her failures might be. But this time would be different. Not that Jim's going away was a crisis in the ordinary sense, but she would be on her own for an indefinite period. At least she could prove her ability to manage well enough without him.

"I'd have asked Gail Anderson to come and stay with you if the school had been nearer," Jim said. "She'd have been glad to come, I know, if it could have been arranged."

Norah was puzzled. "But I thought you said Gail didn't like me much?"

Jim looked at her queerly. "I don't remember. When did I say that?"

"Christmas night, just before you went to sleep."

He was quiet for a minute. "I'd never thought about it much," he said at last, "till the night of the dance. She didn't seem exactly friendly then. But I think she was upset about something."

"I wonder what."

"End-of-term feeling, maybe. But if she could have stayed with you, you'd both have got better acquainted. Gail's worth knowing."

"I'll be all right," Norah said, mechanically repeating the phrase she had spoken a hundred times already since supper-time. "I'll call all the neighbours on the phone every day. And Judd and Brian between them will keep me supplied with all I need from town."

"I stopped in at the McKinleys on the way back from seeing Brian," Jim said. "Mrs. McKinley will ring you up first thing in the morning, last thing at night. I figure the whole community will be keeping an eye on you. Mrs. McKinley suggested that you and Phillip move over there while I'm away. They've got plenty of room, But I didn't think you'd like it very much."

The headlight of the train gleamed around a curve. The train was still miles away, but Jim and Norah got out of the car. The platform loungers looked at them curiously and one man spoke to Jim.

"Figgered you'd be pullin' out tonight," he said casually. "Len Hoskins was tellin' us about the telegram. Too bad about your old man."

Jim nodded without speaking.

"Figger he'll last till you get there?"

Jim turned quickly away. Phillip, wide-eyed with excitement at sight of the incoming train, hopped up and down on the platform shouting at the top of his lungs. Jim picked him up and hugged him.

"Look after Mummy," he said. "I'll bring you something nice when I get back."

He set the child back on his feet, kissed Norah quickly and caught up his bag. "Be seeing you," he said.

"Good-bye, Jim," Norah said. "I hope things won't be too hard."

He vanished into the day-coach. For a few moments she saw him silhouetted against a window as the train slipped slowly past the station, belching great clouds of grey-black smoke. Then she

could see him no longer. The train slid away into the night, its lights for a minute or two a dazzling belt of stars moving across the dim grey plain, bearing him farther and farther from her with every revolution of the wheels, every heart-beat of the engine. When she could no longer see the lights she accepted the fact that he was gone.

The group of loungers disintegrated swiftly and soon there was no one on the platform. Inside the station-house a light burned dimly. The elevators standing in a straight line along the track loomed in the blackness of the night like gigantic monoliths, and for a moment Norah had the queer impression that she was in a region from which all life had long since departed, the dim flickering light in the station-house her candle as she moved through a place of obelisks and tombs.

She started the car and drove back down the main street, deserted now except for Joe McAskill, the postmaster, trundling along the sidewalk the barrowful of mail he had taken off the train. Just for a minute she found it hard to face the highway and the rutted sideroad where no light of any kind showed and no figures moved. Not that she expected any trouble on the way home, but there was comfort in the knowledge that all about her in the silent houses there were people. People whom she did not know, people whom she did not care, perhaps, to know, but who stood for life in the midst of the vast emptiness which stretched away on every side.

"Daddy will be home soon," she told Phillip, as much for the sake of hearing her own voice as of reassuring her child.

"Will he be home tonight?"

"Not tonight, dear. But very soon."

Phillip sniffed noisily. "What's he going to bring me?" he demanded. "Will it be all wrapped up?"

"Something very nice, Phillip. And it will be all wrapped up."

"Will it have wheels on it?"

"I don't know," Norah said. "Very likely."

She didn't really need gas, but the corner gas-station was open and the bright light attracted her. She drove up to the pump and asked Big Mike Svarich, the proprietor, for two gallons. Big Mike gave her the gas and began to wipe the frost from the windshield.

"Jim goin' to make it?" he asked conversationally.

"I don't know," Norah said, wondering how Mike had found out about Jim's father.

Mike answered her unspoken question. "Figgered he'd be on the road tonight. Len Hoskins, he told us about the telegram soon as it come. Too bad about the old man."

"Did you know Mr. Armstrong?" Norah asked.

"Sure thing. One of the old-timers around here. Queer cuss. Sort of dried up when his missus died. Sorry to hear the bad news, though."

Big Mike was an Ukranian whose thick accent betrayed his central European origin. Just now his ugly seamed face was concerned. "Suppose you'll be stayin' with neighbours, Miss' Armstrong?"

"Why, no," Norah said. "We'll be all right."

Big Mike shook out his chamois with deliberation. "Guess you know best," he said, after a pause. "'Taint a good country to be new in though. Not in winter-time."

"We'll be all right," Norah repeated. But this time she spoke without much conviction.

On the way home Phillip fell sound asleep. He lay slumped against Norah, his head resting insecurely on her arm. Whenever she swung the wheel he stirred but did not wake. She was sorry in a way that he had fallen asleep for she wanted him to talk to her. She had known that she would be lonely after seeing Jim off, but anticipation had not modified the harshness of the reality. And then the circumstances surrounding his departure had been disturbing. If he had gone off in broad daylight when the sun was shining, if she hadn't stopped for gas and talked to Big Mike, she would have felt differently now. Things would be better in the morning. After all, she reassured herself, her loneliness owed its existence to the fact that the man she loved had gone away from her for a little while. Nothing else was involved. Nothing at all. Indeed, she was fortunate to be married to a man whom she missed so much, even though he was gone from her for only a few days. Only, she wished she hadn't talked to Big Mike.

The "side-road" seemed to have extended its length by many miles; the side-road which was now no more than two deep rutted tracks running between smooth white borders whose limits coincided with the range of light spreading out from the headlights of the car. Once the car swerved out of the ruts and for an agonizing moment Norah thought she was in the snowbank. She spun the wheel desperately, felt the tires grip the track again and the car accelerate with a violent shivering jerk. Phillip awoke with a shrill cry of alarm.

"It's all right, son," Norah comforted him. "We'll soon be home."

"Will Daddy be there?"

"No, Phillip," Norah explained patiently. "Daddy's gone away on the train."

"We'll be lonesome without Daddy," Phillip said, repeating earnestly, if with no great understanding, what Norah had told him several times during the afternoon.

"He'll not be gone very long," Norah said. "And remember, Phillip, he told you that you were to take care of me while he's away."

"Sure," Phillip said amiably. His voice became animated. "I wonder if he'll bring me something with wheels on it. Maybe a dump-truck, maybe a jeep."

"We'll just have to wait and see," was on the tip of Norah's tongue. But she did not want to discourage Phillip's chatter. Instead, she suggested other exciting possibilities and Phillip was still wide awake and talking steadily when, heart in mouth, Norah made the right-angled turn off the road and on to the private driveway leading to the house. A minute later and she was safe in her own yard.

She put the car away in the garage, locked the door as Jim had instructed her to do though she did not know why, and hurried to the house. The night was very dark and still, and Norah was already wise enough in the ways of prairie weather to suspect that snow was coming. The headlights of the car had caught a few flakes drifting

unhurriedly across her line of vision, big flat flakes like those which fell, but very rarely, in the Old Country.

"More snow," she told Phillip, stopping just inside the kitchen door long enough to kick off her high Russian boots. "You can shovel the walks in the morning."

She switched on the light in the kitchen—how marvellous it was to have electricity on the farm!—and looked about her with a strong sense of relief. So far things had gone well enough, and now that she was safe inside the walls of home she hardly felt lonely, even for Jim. She would miss him, of course, but he would be calling her on the phone every night. "Nice going, Norah," he would say approvingly. "I needn't have worried about you." Something like that.

The phone jangled—three shorts and a long, the opening of Beethoven's *Fifth*. That was the way she remembered their ring. It was Mrs. McKinley calling.

"Jim, he asked us to ring you up," she explained. "I started callin' half an hour ago. Found out from the agent when the train left. Judd, he figgered you were in the ditch. We were goin' to give you another fifteen minutes before Judd started out to look for you."

"I stopped for gas," Norah explained. "And I drove slowly all the way home. It's good of you to call. Tell Judd I nearly did end up in the ditch."

"I said to Jim you were welcome to come and stay here," Mrs. McKinley said, a faintly reproving note in her voice. "But he didn't seem to figger you'd feel much at home."

"Oh, it wasn't that," Norah protested. "Only, with Phillip . . ."

"And, of course, with Brian comin' over to keep an eye on you every day you won't get lonesome."

Norah bit her lip to keep back an angry reply. "We're lucky he lives so close," she said.

She was not really much disturbed by Mrs. McKinley's insinuation, if it was such, because she had little respect for anything Mrs. McKinley said. Not disturbed for herself, anyway. Jim would be hurt, though, if gossip reached his ears. But Norah could not assume

responsibility for such an eventuality. She had asked that Weary come instead of Brian. There was nothing more she could have done.

After she had hung up the receiver, she hurried Phillip off to bed. As she had feared, the trip to town had done his cold no-good. He had begun to cough, and his eyes were watery. Tonight she told him only a very short story indeed, and permitted him to escape the ritual of teeth-brushing.

"You can say your prayers after I've tucked you in," she said, but he refused the concession because tonight he had special favours to ask.

"Please God," he said, after finishing "Now I lay me", "look after Daddy won't you and make him bring me a dump-truck, a great big red one with rubber wheels please God amen." Norah did not chide him. After all, a dump-truck was a small enough request to make of the Deity. She would see to it that Jim brought the dump-truck.

She stayed by Phillip's bed until he had fallen asleep. His breathing, she was relieved to observe, was regular, and she did not think he had a fever. "He'll be better in the morning," she told herself, and went downstairs almost light-heartedly.

She read for a while, and when she was sure that Phillip was sound asleep, played the piano. It was late, but she wasn't sleepy at all. She was surprised at her own tranquillity. But she had always felt that her resources were adequate to meet most crises so long as she had time to think about them beforehand, so long as she wasn't taken by surprise. "We Brandons, my dear," her father had told her in one of his most expansive moments—they had slipped away together for a long day in the country and were coming home late at night, her father very dignified and very drunk—"we Brandons have always esteemed courage the first of the virtues. It is the one thing with which we have been abundantly endowed—the one thing." She had known even then that her father was whistling in the dark, trying to screw his courage to the point of facing Aunt Lucy, but perhaps there was something in what he said. It was nice to think so. There wasn't anything the matter with her own cour-

age, she was sure of that. Here she was alone with her little boy in the middle of the vast prairie, snow-bound almost, and she wasn't afraid at all. Not even upset. Then remembering how Jim had chided her for reading and believing too many Western novels she laughed to herself a little shame-facedly. "I'm romancing," she said, and went out to the kitchen to make a pot of tea. It would be nice to drink tea without feeling that she ought to have made coffee for Jim's sake.

She *was* romancing, because she wasn't really alone and snow-bound in the middle of the wind-swept prairie. All she had to do to be in instant touch with the neighbours was to take down the telephone receiver and turn the little crank in the side of the telephone box. All she had to do to hear the voices of the outside world for five thousand miles beyond Twin Buttes was to snap on the switch of the radio. She was surrounded on all sides by friends and neighbours easily reached and ready on the instant to do her bidding. Jim was wrong. There was still a sense of community in the rural West. Tonight she felt it for the first time.

And tomorrow—she was sure it would be tomorrow—Brian Malory would come riding across the snow-covered fields on Wolfe to see how she was faring. She would ask him in, of course (not to do so would be unthinkable) and give him something to eat. She would urge him to listen to some records, and she would even play the piano for him if he asked her, and they would talk a great deal about Ireland. All the time she would be safe. From Brian, from herself most of all. As safe as if Jim were in the room with them. All the time Brian would know that he could not touch her, that he could no longer draw her to his side. The knowledge filled her with pride. Her assurance was proof of her strength and her triumph.

She went to bed some time after midnight. The wind had risen, and though she could see very little when she looked out she knew that snow was falling. But the snow made no difference. She knew the worst that it could do, for only a week ago there had been a blizzard so violent that you could hardly see the barn from the kitchen door. No matter how loudly the wind blew, how deep the snow

1
piled up across the fields, she and Phillip were safe. Half a century ago things would have been different. Now isolation was a thing of the past. Romance had been routed by science. You couldn't live dangerously on the prairies now even if you wanted to.

But just before getting into bed Norah yielded suddenly to an impulse which she had scarcely felt since childhood. After all, she said to herself, half ashamed, there's a reason. And kneeling down beside the bed she repeated "Now I lay me" all the way through. Like Phillip, she added a request all her own: "Please God, bring him back to me soon."

CHAPTER 12

MORNING STOLE ACROSS THE PRAIRIES FAINT AND GREY. THERE was no sun, nor any trace of sunlight; only a hesitant lifting of the night's blackness, a kind of morning twilight, except that twilight came and went with quietness, and there was violence in the spectacle that the grey dawn uncovered to the anxious watching eyes of men. The snow drove in from across the invisible waste in nearly horizontal lines, piling against fences, buildings, hedges, all obstacles that stood in its pathway, in great rounded dunes up which the new-fallen flakes whirled in spirals to form leaping crests, forked white flames that flickered continuously on the sight, changing according to the pace of the wind in height and swiftness of up-leaping but never in design.

Across the level places where there was nothing to stop it, over a hard-packed surface of its own creating, the snow ran in snake-like convolutions, alive but without sentience, aimless and headlong in its wild flurrying before the wind, wind which because its strength seemed to vary minute by minute, was one more inconstant element in a world where order and control had ceased utterly to be. The wind came from nowhere, driving the snow before it in a mad whirling dance that was without pattern or purpose. A host of pipers played on a thousand pipes the music of the dance, each pipe shrill and discordant in itself, yet blending magically with its fellows into a sustained and awful harmony, a demoniac orchestra called from hell to pipe the music of the whirlwind.

When Norah looked out of her bedroom window she could not believe that day had come. The clock on the bureau said half-past nine, and Phillip, who had left his cot long since to snuggle in beside her, was clamouring for his breakfast. But she wouldn't have

known by any signs outside. A shifting grey pall hung over the earth, and there were no objects to be discovered anywhere behind it, unless that shadowy outline which showed for a moment when the wind dropped was the barn. There was only the shadowy outline; and when it disappeared there was only the greyness and the snakes sliding past over the smooth icy surface of the snow, and the leaping forked tongues that fringed the tops of the mountainous drifts. The drifts, she knew, marked the burial places of fences and wind-breaks, and even one or two of the small sheds in the yard. If the storm lasted much longer, other buildings would disappear and perhaps even the garage, for already the snow was near the top of the doors.

Norah did not look out of the window for long. There was no use when there was nothing to see except whirling snow against a grey-white background in which there was no line of demarcation between earth and sky. But she was not alarmed. The storm was a nuisance; it would keep Phillip inside and there would be a lot of shovelling to do, but it would blow itself out before evening. The earlier blizzards hadn't lasted as long as twenty-four hours.

"Play inside this morning," she told Phillip, helping him with his buttons. "It's nasty out. Windy, and oh, so cold."

Phillip sniffed. "I want breakfast," he said. "I want breakfast awful quick. I want to go out and shovel."

It was going to be a very trying day. Phillip's cold didn't seem any better. If he were so fretful early in the morning he would be like a little bear with a sore head by night-time.

"Now remember, Phillip," she warned him. "Daddy said you were to look after me. That means you're to help me all you can by being a good boy every minute of the day and doing what I tell you. That's why Daddy's going to bring you a nice present, because he knows you'll be a good boy."

"How does he know?" Phillip demanded.

"Never you mind," Norah said. "He knows all right. And he'll know if you're bad. But you'll be a good boy all the time, won't you, dear? Because it'll be a lovely present."

Bribery, of course, according to the books. Bribery and spirit-

ual corruption. But one of the most effective ways of dealing with a small and exceedingly active shut-in three-year-old. An occasional reminder of the forthcoming gift, and the alleged terms of its bestowal, would probably work wonders when Phillip became really difficult. Not that he was often difficult, even though he was an only child. Norah sometimes thought that by comparison with most small children whom she knew or remembered, Phillip was more than usually self-sufficient. He had to be self-sufficient, of course, because he had no other children to play with. The nearest, the Stoddard children, lived five miles away. Phillip saw them rarely, and never for long.

His isolation had worried Norah at first; she had been afraid that he might become what she herself had been, an 'ingrown' child. But there were no signs of any such tendency yet, perhaps because in his home life there were so few repressions. He was a remarkably happy little boy most of the time, and Norah liked to think that his happiness was a reflection of his environment. But he was always happier outside the house than in; on even the coldest days he liked to play out-of-doors, a red-faced little teddy-bear in his heavy winter clothes, tumbling about in the deep drifts seemingly impervious to cold. But not today, not with the wind whipping across the prairies at thirty miles an hour and the thermometer hovering just above the zero mark.

She did the routine housework quickly and mechanically, stoked great fires in the kitchen and living-room, and waited confidently for the storm to blow itself out. By noon the snowfall had so far diminished that she was able to see the barn almost clearly, and looking the other way she could distinguish the parallel rows of drifts which marked the sides of the road. But the wind had dropped hardly at all. It seemed to be getting colder, too, so that Norah found it difficult to keep the house warm. The floors were icy cold all over, there were draughts creeping in at every window, under the doors, from upstairs, even, so it seemed to Norah, through the walls and floors. By noon the window-panes were frosted over so thickly that it was no longer possible to see through any part of them. And the weather forecast, to which Norah listened at noon with a kind of breathless excitement and apprehension, predicted no immediate break in the weather.

After lunch Norah played nursery rhymes to Phillip and told him stories for nearly an hour. All the time she was listening for a knock on the door, subconsciously at first, and later with a kind of tense alertness which no appeal to reason could do more than modify for a little while. She did not believe that Brian Malory would come; it would be sheer folly on his part to venture out in such a storm as this, but she could not deny herself the luxury of hope. For the sense of isolation which she had scarcely felt for months was of a sudden real and inexorably pressing, and it seemed as if nothing could overcome it except the sound of a voice from the outside world. The radio was a poor substitute for flesh and blood, how poor she had not known until now. For whenever she turned the dial and heard voices and music she was compelled against her will to visualize the fantastic shimmer of flying snow between herself and the place from which the music and voices came. The radio intensified rather than diminished her loneliness; and because it had failed her where she so confidently expected to find it a solace and a companion, she experienced a sudden feeling of precariousness, as if the supports on which she was depending were falling away one by one.

By three o'clock it was almost dark outside and the wind seemed to be rising again. She drew the blinds and curtains close in all the rooms and switched on the light in the living-room. At four she made herself a cup of tea which she drank hastily and without relish. At five she prepared a supper which neither she nor Phillip wanted to eat. She knew positively then that Brian Malory would not come. But the assurance was not altogether depressing. It was the waiting and hoping that were so hard. Now, knowing that she would be cut off from human contacts for another night, she vowed that she would make the best of the situation.

"After all," she assured Phillip, who was not listening, "we're warm and cozy, aren't we? The wind can't get at us no matter how loudly it howls. We've lots to eat and lots of wood and coal for the fires. Why, we're just as safe and happy as if we were in a great big house in the city."

"I wish Daddy was here," Phillip said.

"Daddy will be home soon. And to-night he'll call us on the telephone. Any time now, I should think. Would you like to say 'Hello' to him?"

Phillip looked at her, wide-eyed with delight. "Will he tell me what the present's going to be?"

"But it wouldn't be a surprise if he told you, would it? You might tell him, though, that you'd like something with wheels on it. And I'm going to tell him that you're being an awfully good little boy."

The phone rang just as she was finishing the dishes—three shorts and a long, crisp and decisive, a Central ring. Norah took down the receiver so hastily that it slipped out of her damp fingers and she fumbled for it in a kind of panic. It was Jim calling, and her heart leapt.

"Jim, darling!" she cried. "How are you?"

His voice sounded muffled and infinitely far away. There were strange sounds, crackling noises, coming over the wires, and at times she could not hear his voice at all. Then suddenly it would come in clear and strong, only to fade midway through a sentence, like a voice on a short-wave broadcast. But he was all right, his father still alive though unconscious. That much Norah heard and no more before his voice faded out altogether and she held a dead receiver in her hand. She pressed the button at the side of the telephone box and turned the crank in frantic jerks. There was no answer from Central, no sound at all coming over the wires. In a real panic now, Norah rang again and again, Central first, then each of the neighbours in turn. No one answered her. The line was down somewhere, had gone down while she was talking to Jim.

She hung up the receiver at last, and for a minute was perilously close to tears. Phillip all the time was tugging at her skirts and crying in real earnest.

"You said I could say 'Hello' to Daddy," he sobbed. "You said I could."

She picked the child up in her arms and tried to comfort him. "But something happened, Phillip," she explained. "The line broke. I couldn't talk to Daddy myself."

"How did it break?"

"I don't know. I guess the wind must have been too strong for it."

"Did Daddy say what present he was going to bring me?"

Norah shook her head. "He didn't have time. But it will be very nice, I know, because you're being so awfully good."

She carried Phillip into the living-room and sat down on the chesterfield, holding him on her knee. But he scrambled down at once and began to play listlessly with his wind-up train. There wasn't anything to be afraid of, really, not anything at all. She and Phillip were comfortable and safe. But what if something happened, some accident which in normal times would be relatively inconsequential? Supposing she slipped and broke a limb? Supposing Phillip cut himself badly, the way he had done that day last summer when he had been playing with an old tin can? There wouldn't be anything she could do to get help. The phone was dead, the roads impassible, the neighbours as far out of reach as if they had all been fifty miles away. Quite suddenly Norah began to cry.

She stopped almost at once for Phillip was concerned and frightened. He had never seen his mother cry before.

"It's all right, dear," she said. "Mummies cry sometimes a little bit. Just for something to do, I guess. But when Mummies cry it doesn't mean that they're hurt or feeling sick or anything like that."

Yes, she thought, mothers do cry sometimes, and their crying always meant something. Unexpectedly, resentment began to take the place of the apprehension and loneliness which had prompted her tears. It wasn't fair of Jim to have left her alone like this, even though his father was dying. He knew what Western blizzards were like, how often and hard they struck. He knew that a storm like the one blowing outside might cut her off from the rest of the world, leaving her isolated and helpless, a prey to any misfortune which might strike her down. He had left her with scarcely so much as a warning. She had spoken in ignorance when she had protested that she would be all right. Jim should have known that. He shouldn't have listened to her.

And then the object of her resentment changed. Jim was not

really to blame. He had gone away believing that he had left her in Brian Malory's charge. But Brian had betrayed his trust. She knew that the phrase passing through her mind was absurdly melodramatic, but it expressed the truth. Brian hadn't come. Now it was pitch dark and he would not come. And she was cut off completely, surrounded by a demon-driven storm, a storm which far from being an unmotivated consequence of air masses in collision, seemed actually to be inspired by a malicious sentence.

But the mood of resentment and self-pity did not last for long. The storm was such that only a madman would have ventured out in it. It would be flattering to know that someone was willing to be mad for her sake, but Norah resigned herself to accepting the prosaic reality. Presently, when she was stoking the big heater for what seemed like the hundredth time that day, with coal carried in from the shed adjoining the kitchen, she began to feel almost cheerful again. For here surely was a situation which tested her courage and self-reliance to the limit, a situation all the more challenging because so wholly unlooked-for. Again Norah's mind leapt ahead and she anticipated the scene of Jim's return, trying to visualize what his face would look like when he learned that for two days she had been wholly isolated by a great blizzard, that she had carried on, serene and unafraid while the furies of hell raged just outside her walls so that no help, had she needed it, could possibly have reached her. And he would say, in tones of awe and admiration. "You can take it all right, dear!" And she would say, "It wasn't anything, Jim. I had Phillip to look after me." Whimsically she would say it, in a way not quite calculated to deceive.

Tonight she would not sleep upstairs. It was cold in the unheated rooms, bitterly cold, and she could not risk Phillip's catching a chill. He seemed a little better tonight, but with children it was so difficult to tell. He still had a little fever, she thought, but at least his nose wasn't running quite so freely. Besides, the living-room was more comforting somehow than the rest of the house. The heater, even if it did make strenuous demands on you, was companionable, and there were pictures all around the walls to look at. Upstairs the wind seemed louder, and the queer noises which it made fighting

with itself under the eaves would bother her, she knew, though they never did when Jim was at her side.

She brought out the folding cot from the den and made it up for Phillip to sleep on, putting two straight-backed chairs on either side so that he could not fall out. The novelty of the bed pleased him; he scrambled in quickly and without protest, though he stayed awake a long time, talking to Norah, to his favourite rag doll, to himself. When at last he fell asleep, as always on his back with one hand under his head, Norah felt another great surge of loneliness come over her. She turned on the radio, very low so as not to disturb Phillip, but the static was intolerable, worse than she had ever heard it before. Several times she went to the phone and rang Central or the neighbours. She knew that the line could not possibly be repaired before daybreak, but there was always that part of her which retained an obstinate belief in miracles. Besides, ringing the phone gave her something to do.

She got her work-basket out after a while and put a patch on the seat of Phillip's snow-suit. There were some of Jim's socks that needed darning in her work-basket, but she did not pick them up. It was bad enough to be alone without having a reminder of Jim's absence at her finger-tips. She was glad when ten o'clock came and she felt justified in making herself a cup of tea. After she had drunk the tea she dozed behind the big heater, curiously tired since she had done no hard work, unwilling to go to bed because she was afraid that the fires would burn out. Jim had shown her how to bank the heater for the night, but she was not sure that she remembered all his instructions.

At length her drowsiness increased to the point where she several times dropped off into cat-naps from which she awoke with her heart pounding furiously, her nerves on edge. She hated to go upstairs for blankets, but she went at last, quickly, and snatched the coverings from the big double bed. At midnight she lay down on the chesterfield, still in the slacks and sweater she had worn all day, and drew the blankets over her. She did not turn out the light.

The wind howled nearly all night. Norah dozed fitfully for a long time after lying down, but some time before morning she fell

into a sound sleep. She awoke before daybreak to find everything quiet, and for a moment she felt almost happy. But by the time she had finished shaking down the heater and putting fresh coal into the fire-box, the wind was once more pounding against the walls, and she knew that she had been deceived by a momentary lull into thinking that the storm had blown itself out. It was still dark outside; and after seeing that the fresh shovelful of coal had caught satisfactorily, Norah went back to the chesterfield. But this time her sleep was troubled; through her dreams strange distorted figures passed and re-passed, figures without depth, without meaning, even without outlines, but threatening, sinister, full of menace. When Phillip's aggressive outcrying awoke her at last she was relieved, and at the same time reluctant to get up. Her neck and shoulders ached; her feet, which had escaped from beneath the blankets, were icy cold even in heavy woollen socks. But she was tired, more tired than when she had lain down some hours before, and she did not want to face the day.

For the storm still raged outside. That much she knew without looking, for although the clock on the living-room table showed nine o'clock, the single bulb which she had left lit in the night glowed dimly in a semi-darkness for which drawn blinds and drapes were not wholly responsible; and she could hear clearly the whine and whistle of the wind, sharper, more penetrating, than yesterday. The thought of the long lonely hours ahead was troubling almost to the point of tears. If it weren't for Phillip's sake, she thought, she would stay on the couch all day, getting up only once in a while to replenish the fire, and wait there until someone found her.

She got up at last, and because the windows were covered over with a coating of frost half an inch thick, laid on in fantastic designs which at another time she might have admired, she went at once to the kitchen door and looked out. The scene was the same as yesterday's—leaden skies, whirling snow which obscured everything behind its shifting curtain. Indeed, there was no sky at all, only what seemed to be a solidifying of those elements which had movement immediately above the surface of the earth. The bitter blast of icy air which struck Norah just before she slammed shut the

kitchen door penetrated through her clothing to the flesh beneath. It was as if she had been stripped suddenly naked, so little protection did her clothes seem to give against the bite of wind and frost.

Today would be the same as yesterday. She was suddenly fatalistic, and the mood did not pass—as it had always before done—immediately. What was happening, she began to think, was not the outcome of indifferent forces which by an unhappy coincidence had combined to produce a violent disturbance at a time when she was least able to meet it. She seemed now to see in the shape of things a deliberateness of intention actuated by malice and directed against herself and all men living in the vast vacuity of the prairies. It was as if the indifferent forces of nature were not indifferent at all; they were fighting back against man's intrusion into a region where he was an interloper; they had resisted him stubbornly from the time of his in-coming, retreating now, now re-asserting their domination as in that bleak period of drought and depression called the Hungry Thirties. But retreating or advancing they were ever on the look-out for the slightest sign of vulnerability. Coincidences, if they were many, ceased to be coincidences; they became a system. It was not enough to explain her present plight in terms of sheer bad luck. The storm gods had waited till Jim was out of the way, waited until she, misunderstanding the depth of her resources, was alone; then they had mustered their strength, strength such as these wind-swept plains had seldom felt before, and directed it towards her destruction.

She thought now with something like terror of the strange words Gail Anderson had used: the earth's hunger. "It's a hungry earth. It feeds on our hopes, on us," she had said. Gail's words were prophetic. The next moment Norah laughed, almost hysterically. But that's all so childish, she told herself over and over again. So childish. Nothing can happen. Not even if I don't see anyone for days. There's food in the house, and plenty of fuel. We're safe, we're warm. The storm can't touch us. And it can't last much longer.

If only she could avoid the last accident, the accident which would be the confirmation of the system she wanted to deny. She was haunted now by fear of fire. Silly, incredibly silly. But there

had been so many stories in the newspapers, on the radio, of isolated homes swept by flames, children trapped and destroyed, death striking with a swiftness and ferocity beyond calculation or control. These things really happened. They could happen to her and Phillip. The house was old; for all Norah knew the brick chimney in the sealed-off attic might be crumbling and rotten. And in a wind such as this a spark would be fanned to an inferno in less than the time of thinking. Even if they escaped from the flames their destruction would be certain. Perhaps even now a spark had taken hold somewhere. . . .

Again she fought off rising hysteria. What was it that old King Lear had said?—*down, thou climbing sorrow, thy element's below*. She must cling to the reality of things. But she bundled Phillip into his warmest clothes and let the fire burn as low as she dared.

By noon the wind had dropped. But still the snow fell heavily, and the cold had not modified. Still, it was something that the wind had fallen, something that she could no longer hear the noises of the storm outside. Cold wasn't so bad; it didn't make an obvious impact on the nerve centres like the wind. A silent enemy, perhaps, but easy to fight, with plenty of fuel in the house. Fuel was your ammunition against cold. But the wind was different, the wind was a power and a voice. It whistled, laughed, mocked, threatened you with unspeakable things. The wind was alive and full of hate. Hate for Norah and all men. It spoke for the powers seeking to re-assert domination over the spaces of earth where man was an impious intruder. Now that the wind had dropped the powers were less real.

At noon Norah turned on the radio and listened through the blurring crackle of static to the news broadcast. The storm was the principal and most sensational topic of the report. Trains could not run, airplanes could not fly. Traffic of every kind was at a standstill. Norah's isolation was part of a large pattern. The entire area within a one-hundred-mile radius of Twin Buttes was cut off from the rest of the world. Railway tracks were buried under drifts half a mile long and twenty feet high. Cars had disappeared from sight along the highways where they had been abandoned; and the

highways, like the cars, were in turn obliterated under the huge blanket-like mass of snow which spread for hundreds of miles across the plains. There were vague, alarming hints of food shortages, power failures, telephone lines down everywhere. It would be days, perhaps weeks, before normal communications could be resumed; the worst blizzard in half a century and the end not immediately in sight. There was talk of fresh disturbances moving in from Alaska, air-fronts, contending elements of hot and cold. And there would be more snow.

All this Norah heard in a kind of stupor. It was enough to know that the storm was not over. Enough to know that for hours, perhaps days, she would be alone. *Alone on a wide, wide sea.* A sea of white where the water-snakes were snow-snakes and there was no colour anywhere, *no hornèd moon with one bright star within the nether tip, no bloody sun in a hot and copper sky at noon*—only a vast unbroken whiteness, earth and sky and all between, a shifting shimmering whiteness which neither eye nor mind could pierce through, a *moving pall o'erhanging our dark spirits* which no shape of beauty could remove because all shapes of beauty were lost behind it. Strange how the poets kept coming into her mind: Coleridge and Keats, whom she had read and misunderstood at school. She remembered something else which Miss Bates had said in class at St. Aidan's—great poetry is for times of crisis—something like that. But poetry didn't comfort, didn't console, not the poetry Norah remembered. What she needed was something soporific, something to dull the senses and take away the keen edge of feeling. Great poetry never did that. Not Keats and Coleridge anyway.

Suddenly Norah sat bolt upright in her chair, shocked into attention. Someone had died last night in the storm. An old man and an old woman, husband and wife. They had gone to visit friends, the news broadcaster said, and the storm had caught them. They wouldn't stay with their friends for the night, they had insisted on getting back before being stormbound. Norah thought she understood how they had felt. She had always hated spending a night in a strange place, unless it was impersonal, like an hotel. She had always rather liked hotels, because they left you alone. It was dif-

ferent in another person's home. There Norah had somehow felt responsible, she wasn't quite sure what for, and vaguely ill at ease. When she was an old woman she would hate to spend a night in a strange place still more.

The old couple had started for their home, only three or four miles away, in mid-afternoon, back to the comfort and companionship of loved and familiar things. They had vanished into the wild dance of the storm and they had not been seen again. This morning someone had found the team dragging an upturned sleigh behind them. Somewhere under the waste of snow the old man and old woman lay buried. People said it was easy to die that way, but how could anyone know? First a forgetting, they said, and then a sleep. That was all. *Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting*, the poet said, and death was the same only the other way round, the forgetting first, then the sleep. Pain at first, perhaps, before the forgetting, but not sudden nor violent; just a numbness of the body and then the mind.

But perhaps they had struggled when the sleigh was upset. Norah saw them dragging themselves forward in the snow, floundering knee and waist deep in the drifts, the old man trying to support his wife with his arm. Or perhaps he would have left her while he tried to catch up to the sleigh, stumbling often, falling often, and calling all the time to the horses in a thin weak voice that the wind caught and tossed away as it issued from his frozen lips. That way would be the worst of all, dying apart after a lifetime of living together. She hoped it hadn't happened that way. She hoped that when the bodies were found they would be together.

The storm was winning. Two old people were dead. In a sudden almost hysterical frenzy Norah caught Phillip in her arms and showered his face and neck with passionate kisses.

"Oh, Phillip," she cried, "I love you, I love you!"

"I love you too, Mummy," Phillip said wonderingly. "And I love Daddy." And because he was very busy just then he slipped quickly off her knee and hurried back to the wonderful tunnel he was building with his blocks over the railway track.

Brian Malory must come that afternoon. He *must* come! Unless

he came she would hear no living voice at all that day from the outside. Jim had told the McKinleys that Brian was keeping an eye on her, and Judd, thinking she was safe, would make no attempt to fight his way through the storm to reach her. Weary Rivers probably did not even know that Jim was away. She could talk to none of the neighbours and certainly not to Jim. He would be worried, she knew, because he could not reach her by phone, because he would read of the great storm. Even now, no matter what his father's condition, he might be getting ready to come back. But the awful thing was that he couldn't reach her. The trains were laid up or snow-bound, and all planes grounded. The great mountain passes were blocked to road traffic by snow-drifts many feet high. Jim wouldn't be able to get home for days and days, no matter how hard he tried. Brian Malory must come.

Now a new and altogether terrifying thought oppressed her. Perhaps Brian had tried to come yesterday. Perhaps he was now lying somewhere in the snow. An old man and old woman had died; perhaps Brian had died too. It could have happened easily enough. Wolfe might have stumbled and thrown him, he might have lost his way, for there were few fences to guide him, and all roads and familiar landmarks had been obliterated. She did not know if Brian was a resourceful man, but she thought it unlikely. He was like herself in some ways. He had too much imagination; and imagination was not, so Norah suspected, the best weapon with which to fight the ferocious cunning of a blizzard.

Again and again she fought off her oppressive fears. There was nothing to worry about, she told herself. Nothing, except losing her head. The thing to do was to keep busy. "Too much thinking hath made me mad," she said aloud, "or it certainly will if I don't stop it." She spent the afternoon being busy. She made batch after batch of cookies—more cookies than she and Phillip would be able to eat in a month. She helped Phillip to build a stupendous palace with his big blocks, and told him a long and not entirely coherent story about the beautiful princess who lived in it. Afterwards, for nearly an hour she played the piano with a kind of defiant anger and a complete disregard of blurred runs and missed notes. Every mo-

ment she was acutely aware of the passing of time, of the coming on of darkness, a darkness which would be only a difference in the degree of gloom which even at noonday had lain over the prairies and penetrated into the house itself. She had left the light on all day in the living-room simply because it had not occurred to her to turn it out.

But however imperceptible the actual change in the intensity of gloom, the knowledge that in mid-afternoon the sun had run his petty course and was now dipping towards the horizon's rim brought with it renewed fears. The long night was upon her again and she dreaded it with an intensity which not even the bombers' nights of a time long past had ever roused in her. For even at their worst the raids had never been able to destroy that sense of companionship stemming from the presence of people all around her, people whom she did not know, who, many of them, might be dead before morning, but who in the grim hours of watching and waiting were real and alive. And always there was the dawn and the morning sun to look forward to, a dawn which brought with it a relaxing of the night's tension and a degree at least of peace. But tomorrow there would be no dawn, nor, perhaps, the day after. If only she could draw aside the curtains and look out at the sun. No matter how dreary the scene it illuminated it would bring cheer. But tomorrow, so the radio broadcast said, there would be no sun, only a brief lightening of the darkness. Meanwhile there was the night to be lived through, a terror-haunted night with only the noises of the wind and Phillip's wheezy breathing to provide uneasy companionship.

Phillip's wheezy breathing! Perhaps if Phillip hadn't had a cold things would be better. Norah couldn't help thinking of possible complications. The house was draughty; suppose he took croup. She would know what to do in the ordinary way, but supposing things didn't follow an ordinary course? Or supposing the cold turned into pneumonia? There was no way of reaching a doctor, with the phone dead and the roads impassable. Why, Phillip might die before anyone came near the house at all! And there was nothing, absolutely nothing, Norah could do about it. Except that, if Phillip died, she would die too.

But this was fantastic—this way madness lay. Speculating about

death because Phillip had a cold, because for a day or two she was out of touch with her neighbours! Here for a fleeting moment of time Norah was living the kind of life which had been a commonplace year in and year out for the pioneer women who had settled on the prairies in the early days. Their isolation had been real and permanent. Today women were soft. That was what was the matter with her. She was soft, and she brooded too much. Still an ingrown child.

But Brian must come. He *had* to come! Yet it was foolishness to look for him. Foolishness to hope that he would venture out in such a storm. For he would be risking his life in doing so, and he would ask himself, why should I risk my life to satisfy a whim? But she would pretend that he was coming, pretend that he was really there, at the door. "Brian," Norah would say, "you *are* an Irishman, after all." And he would say, "Why, Norah?" And she would say, "Only an Irishman would be guilty of such wonderful madness."

Because play-acting seemed to quieten her nerves she carried it further. She saw that Phillip was comfortable and content in the living-room and went upstairs, shivering and reckless, and put on the fine underwear and the red dress Jim had given her for Christmas. She did her hair in a new way, an upsweep, applied lipstick and eye make-up lavishly, and came down quickly to the living-room, all the time mocking her folly. Dressing up had been something to do, something which helped to pass away even a few minutes of eternity. But now that she had put on the red dress she did not want to play-act any more. She wanted Brian to see her.

But he would not come. She was sure of that now, had been sure all along. She wanted to cry—it would be a relief to cry even though tears would streak the mascara—but no tears came. Like the girl in the poem who neither spoke nor uttered words when home they brought her warrior dead, she must weep or she must die; and then they had put her child on her knee and she had cried her eyes out. But Norah didn't cry. couldn't cry, not even when she took Phillip on her knee and held him close, feeling that she must never let him go. The trouble was that she didn't really have anything to cry about; her warrior wasn't dead. It was just that she was all dressed up and there was no one to admire her. Her difficulties were as simple as that. And as ridiculous,

Suddenly she was in the midst of a great darkness. She could see nothing at all, but she heard Phillip's startled scream loud in her ears. "It's all right, Phillip," she said. "The lights have gone out. But we have lamps, we'll have light in a little while."

She stumbled into the kitchen, Phillip clutching her hand and uttering little whimpering cries all the way. He had always been afraid of the dark; now he was terrified. The lamps were in the bottom of a cupboard where Norah had put them after the electric light had been installed, and she found them after a minute's panicky groping. There was oil in one—she could tell by shaking it; she lit it quickly and set it on the kitchen table. The light seemed dim and faint after the warm glow of electric bulbs, and she hastened to bring out all the remaining lamps in the cupboard. There was a can of coal-oil in the shed. She filled the lamps, spilling oil on the floor in her haste, and lit all of them.

She sat down again because she could not stand up any longer. "You see, Phillip," she said, trying hard to smile, "everything's all right now."

"Why did the lights go out?" he asked, still clinging to her.

"I guess the wires must have broken," Norah said.

"Who'll fix them? When will they fix them?"

She tried to answer Phillip's questions and all the time she was thinking, this can't go on much longer. Someone must come. If no one came she would certainly go mad. Evil was all about her, closing in. She had fought it off till now. But she couldn't fight much longer. There was a limit to what one could endure.

And the limit reached? Norah could not face the answer. She picked Phillip up in her arms, carried him into the living-room. "Time for a little story, Phillip," her lips said. But in her heart she was saying. "Oh, God, please send Brian to me! Please sent him to me now!"

CHAPTER 13

SHE DID NOT HEAR HIS KNOCK, IF HE HAD KNOCKED, BECAUSE OF the wind. She knew nothing of his coming until she heard movement in the kitchen, someone coughing and a great stamping of feet. She set Phillip on the floor and stood up very deliberately. She tried to recall the fine phrases she was going to greet Brian with and could not remember any of them. She walked almost hesitantly from living-room to kitchen and smiled at him without saying anything at all. Then, without conscious volition on her part—or so it seemed afterwards when she could think clearly—she was across the kitchen and in his arms.

"Oh, Brian, Brian," she sobbed. "Thank God you've come!"

He kissed her, and his lips were cold upon hers. He kissed her again and again and she held herself close to him, though his heavy sheepskin coat was thick with snow and frost.

"Hello, Norah," he said at last, "You seem glad to see me."

Norah let him go then and stood back a little way while he took off his coat. "Brian, I'd have died if you hadn't come!" she babbled half incoherently. "I know I would! I've been so frightened. . . . Oh, Brian, your face is frozen!"

He slid his hand over the hard circular patches of white which stood out on his cheeks and chin in strong relief against the redness of the rest of his face. "I'll thaw out by degrees," he said. "The important thing is not to get too close to a hot fire for a while."

His eyes twinkled through frosty lashes. "I must say though, Norah, that your welcome would have thawed out practically anything."

She was instantly on the defensive. "It's been awful," she said. "Alone here—no phone! And the lights just went out!"

He stamped heavily on the floor. "Guess I'd better shed my footwear," he said. "There's not much feeling in my feet."

He sat down and began to unfasten the laces of his sheepskin-lined boots. Suddenly he paused and looked up. "I supposed you're trying to tell me you'd have welcomed Judd McKinley or Albert Cliff the same way?"

"I am not!" Norah flared indignantly. "You know I'd rather see you than anyone else. Can't you see I've got my best dress on? That's for you."

"Your face is smeared," Malory said. "You've been crying on it."

"That was for you too," she said. Then, catching a glimpse of herself in the wash-stand mirror—"Oh, Brian, I look awful!" And she fled upstairs.

When she came down, Brian was sitting beside the kitchen stove, Phillip on his knee. "I don't blame you for being frightened," he said. "I've never seen a storm like this before."

Norah filled the kettle and set it on the stove. "But however did you get here? Honestly, I never dreamed you'd come."

"Didn't you?" he said almost insolently, letting his eyes run over her red dress, her painted mouth.

"I dressed up just to keep my mind off things," she said. "It was something to do."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I really hoped you meant it when you said you'd put the dress on for me."

Later she would admit the truth. But not just yet. Brian was too sure of himself. He waited a moment, and when Norah did not speak, went on matter-of-factly. "I'd have come yesterday, of course, only Mrs. Cliff came over to say that Albert was sick—appendix, she thought. She couldn't get the doctor so we bundled Albert into the sleigh and took him to town. It was nearly midnight when I got back. I wasn't sure that you'd have appreciated a visitor at that hour."

"What an awful trip!" Norah exclaimed. "How's Albert?"

"Doc Harrington is watching him. He'll operate in the office if he has to. Wouldn't be the first time he's done it. But Albert will

be all right. Likely he ate too much. Mrs. Cliff is staying in town with him."

It was unbelievable the change that Malory's coming had worked in her. Less than an hour ago she had been alternating between moods of active terror and passive despair. Now all things were suddenly modified into their proper proportions. There was a storm outside, a bad storm, the worst in half a century. But it would blow itself out after a while. She was safe and Phillip was safe and Jim, she knew, was safe. And she had someone to talk to. While she laid the supper, a meal to which she now looked forward with great appetite, she plied Malory with questions, and heeded his answers hardly at all. When he sat down at the table he looked across at her quizzically.

"You've been having a bad time, haven't you, Norah?"

She nodded. "My own fault as usual, I suppose. But whenever I'm alone I seem to lose my sense of proportion. I get all worked up about the unlikeliest things. Would you believe it, Brian, about all I've thought of since this morning are the accidents that might happen to Phillip and me. Broken ankles, fire, pneumonia, insanity. If you hadn't come—and I'd no right to expect you—I'd probably have worked myself into a fine state of hysterics. The lights going out was the last straw."

"It's the unexpected that gets you, Norah," Brian said between mouthfuls of hot stew. "It's what gets most of us. This was something you hadn't foreseen."

Brian was perceptive as always. But Norah did not immediately agree with him, for it pleased her just now to prolong this discussion of herself. "I don't know, Brian," she said judicially. "I hadn't foreseen the storm, of course. But I should be getting used to it by now, I think."

He shook his head. "There are some things you can't get used to, Norah. They break you because they're stronger than you are. You women of today are so much more complex, more highly strung, than your grandmothers. This is the kind of thing prairie women used to take in their stride."

"I know," Norah said. "That's what makes me so mad with myself. They took it, year in and year out. Why can't I—for a week?"

"Because you've too much imagination, Norah. To survive the life out here without getting badly hurt a woman has to be the stolid type. And you're anything but that."

He laid down his knife and fork and leaned across the table towards her. "Too sensitive as always, Norah. That's been your trouble—or redemption—all along. I told you once that you were on the point of becoming a real one hundred per cent dyed-in-the-wool Westerner. I didn't like to think so, but the signs were pointing that way. I know now I was wrong. Maybe I knew it at the time, too, subconsciously, but I couldn't contradict the evidence. But this isn't your setting, Norah. It's not that you lack courage. That's what you're afraid people will think, isn't it? It's not that at all. Why, some women without courage—real moral courage, that is—could be at home in the middle of the Sahara. It's just that in your case, in the case of a lot of women who come to this God-forsaken part of the earth—neither comfortable farmland nor honest desert—there's a conflict, a bad conflict, between you and your environment. That's why you're on edge most of the time. The country makes you think too much."

That was true, so true that instinctively Norah shied away from talking about herself any more. For the time being at least. "You haven't told me yet how you got here," she said.

Malory shrugged his shoulders. "I left at noon. The wind was blowing from the north-east—the way your house lay. So I just rode straight into it. Though maybe 'rode' isn't the right word. Wolfe was up to his belly most of the time so I broke trail for him. I'd have looked an awful fool, wouldn't I, if the wind had shifted?"

"There's hay and oats in the barn," Norah said. "Did you find some for Wolfe?"

Malory nodded. "I know my way to the bin even in the dark. I found an old horse-blanket too. Wolfe is fine."

Norah could not help feeling a kind of awe whenever she looked at him. There were red angry splotches on his cheek-bones, like great round daubs of rouge, where the frost had bitten him; but otherwise there was nothing in his appearance to suggest that he had just come through an experience which must have tested his physical resources to the limit. And he had endured all this for her.

She wished she could get it out of her head that he doubtless would have endured as much for any neighbour to whom he had pledged his word. Tonight he had taken on new stature, new dignity. He had performed a brave deed, and dismissed the deed with a gesture. He himself did not seem to realize how fine a thing he had done.

"I think," Norah said, "that if you hadn't come I really would have gone crazy. Honestly!"

"Women have, you know, under conditions like these. But you wouldn't, Norah. Not all the way. There's too fine stuff in you for that."

She shook her head, deliberating with a kind of masochistic intent on everything that had passed since she had watched Jim's train out of sight. "Things were beginning to get mixed up in my head," she said. "Not for long at any one time, but more and more often. And I *knew* I was being stupid. That was the infuriating part of it. I knew that Phillip and I were safe and comfortable, knew that nothing could happen—and yet . . ."

She laughed almost nervously, of a sudden embarrassed and constrained. "I just couldn't convince myself, I guess. Anyway, Brian, I'm awfully glad you're here."

He smiled at her and held out his cup for more tea. "We'll forget about the storm," he said. "Let's talk about pleasanter things."

"What things?"

"About yourself. I'm curious."

Trite words surely, but always flattering. Her answer was conventional. "There really isn't much to tell."

She didn't mean that really. She *wanted* to talk about herself. A question, point-blank this time, about her childhood. After that Norah needed no more encouragement. Malory supplied an occasional interjection, no more than that. It was Phillip's shrill interruptions that silenced her at last.

"Brian," she said, "I've been talking my head off for half an hour. Poor Phillip. Poor you!"

"You've taken me back, Norah," Malory said. "Back a long way."

"Was it wise—to go back?"

"I wonder?" he said. "But it was fine."

"Brian, why do you stay here when you hate the West so much?"
He evaded her question. "Are you sure I hate it so much?"

"Sometimes I think you hate the West with all your heart. And no one can hate like an Irishman."

Malory was silent. Norah continued cautiously. "But maybe you're just the typical sentimental Celt-in-exile."

He smiled. "Something in that, I suppose," he said. "Though I'm not flattered to be called typical. But what's true of me is true of you too. We're alike, Norah. You'll never be a Westerner."

"Would you hate me if I were?" she said.

Malory looked at her oddly, she thought. They were approaching dangerous ground, and at once, in self-defence, Norah became the practical housewife.

"Now I *must* get Phillip to bed. He sleeps in the living-room these nights. So do I."

And she added hurriedly, lest Brian misunderstand. "It's cold upstairs."

Brian got up and stretched his long arms above his head. "Joints a bit stiff after the ride, or rather, walk," he confessed. "I'll do the dishes while you put the little beggar away."

Norah gave him the biggest apron she could find and burst out laughing when he stood before her, dishcloth in hand; ready for work. "Why, Brian, you . . . you look . . ."

"Domesticated," he said grumbly. "That's the way with you women; you like to see your men trapped and tamed, body and soul. Any man looks ridiculous in an apron. *I'm* ridiculous. So you look at me and laugh! But it's a pleased sort of laugh, isn't it? I'm a symbol of what man ought to be—secure, chained, like a great dancing bear."

At first Norah thought he was joking, but almost immediately she was not so sure. "You make us sound rather horrid, Brian," she protested. "It's because I know you'll never be tamed that I'm laughing. According to my literature teacher at St. Aidan's the incongruous is always a legitimate source of mirth. Something like that, anyway."

She hurried away then to Phillip and got him ready for bed as quickly as she could. He was tired, he should have been asleep an

hour ago, so she told him only a very little story before tucking him in for the night. But she admitted to herself that she wasn't hurrying just because Phillip was tired, she wanted to get back to Brian. Only when Phillip, in his prayers, repeated the recently added rider "and please God look after Daddy" did she realize, with something of a shock, that she hadn't thought about Jim for nearly two hours. Neither she nor Brian had mentioned his name, and she was all at once ashamed.

Phillip fell asleep almost immediately. Norah went back to the kitchen where Malory was drying the last plate. "You won't need to look the dishes over for grease spots," he assured her, when she complimented him guardedly on his efficiency. "I'm quite competent. Twenty years' experience, you know."

"Don't you ever get tired of it?" Norah said.

"Sure. I'm tired of it all the time."

"Then why don't you get married?"

"I'd sooner be tired of washing dishes than sick of a wife."

Norah was taken aback by the vehemence of his outburst. "But aren't you anticipating?" she said.

"Hardly at my time of life. Knowledge comes from observation rather than personal experience, no matter what the practical philosophers tell you. Most married couples I know are tired to death of each other."

"Jim and I aren't."

She shouldn't have said that, she knew. She was arguing from that personal experience, the validity of which Malory had just denied. The words sounded as if she had spoken in self-defence, to ward off an unjust assumption. But he did not follow up his point.

"Now that you mention Jim," he said, "how is he?"

Norah felt her face redden. "I don't know. He phoned last night. But I couldn't hear him. All right, I suppose."

Malory hung the dish-towel on the line behind the stove. "Why did Jim ask me to keep an eye on you?"

"It was his idea," Norah said, suddenly tense. "Not mine. He said you were the nearest neighbour. I didn't think we should bother you."

When he smiled his lean dark face seemed to light up from within. He sat down at the table across from her and lit his pipe. "Still feel that way?"

Norah shook her head. "I've been a fool, Brian. Unfair to you, all along. Unfair to myself. Now that we're—friends . . ."

She hesitated over the word and was annoyed with herself. "I mean," she stumbled on hurriedly, "now that we know where we stand with each other there's no one I want to see as much as you."

"Where do we stand with each other, Norah?"

She did not know how to answer him. He lit his pipe and exhaled a cloud of smoke, slowly, as if he were deliberating something.

"I should be on my way, Norah."

Fear clutched at her heart. "So soon, Brian?"

"It will be a hard trip home. Even with the wind behind me."

"But will it matter now, if you stay an hour longer? It's dark, things can't get much worse,"

Malory settled slowly back in his chair. "I suppose you're right," he said. "Things can't get much worse."

Norah hesitated again, seeking to express simply and without possibility of misunderstanding, what was in her mind. She felt that when she spoke her voice sounded thin and small.

"You'd better not go back tonight, Brian. We'll bring an arm-chair in here from the living-room. You'll be more comfortable in it than lying in a snow-drift."

She had said the sensible, the intelligent thing. The only thing. But it didn't seem to sound that way. The only sounds Norah could hear came from outside the house. The wind was blowing hard again. She waited for Malory to speak. But he did not say anything.

"Don't you think it's a sensible plan?" she said at last.

"A sensible plan," he agreed. "But I'm not a sensible person."

Again there was nothing to hear but the wind. Wind blowing with that purposefulness which she had heard in it for days and nights past. Already an old man and old woman had died. "Brian," she said, "I won't let you go."

"Why not?"

She sensed danger in the question and wanted to fly from it. At all costs she must be practical, prosaic. "Because you'll never make home, Brian. You know that yourself. Not in the dark. Didn't you hear what happened to the old man and woman?"

Malory smiled at her through a cloud of smoke. "I heard, Norah. But they were old, old and frail. There's no danger. The wind will be behind me."

"And besides," he added, "what difference—if something did happen? It wouldn't matter."

The words should have jarred her. They were an appeal for sympathy, a deliberate sentimentalizing of the situation. But she could not think of them in that way. "Don't be ridiculous, Brian," she murmured.

He got up then and stood over her. She watched him apprehensively, knowing that he had made up his mind to go, praying that she could find words to stop him.

"Norah," he said. "Why did you come here?"

Norah did not understand him. He was talking foolishly. "But Brian, why shouldn't I have come here? I'm Jim's wife."

His face relaxed. The shadow of a smile flitted across it. "You're shrewd, Norah, aren't you? Shrewder than you think sometimes. Smart by instinct, I'd call it. The way most Ulster folk are."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that you disarm me before I've got my gun loaded."

He moved away a little and stood looking at her. When he spoke again his tone was conversational. "I'll try to get over again in a day or two. Is there anything you need?"

Norah shook her head. "There's lot of fuel and food. I'll be all right."

With a tremendous effort of will she stood up and faced him. "Why do you say I shouldn't have come here?"

"Do you really want to know?"

She nodded because she could not trust herself to speak.

"Because I've fallen in love with you."

The words did not come as a surprise. She had been expecting him to say something like that.

"Is it such a dreadful thing, Brian?"

Malory did not answer her. He went on as if he had not heard her question. "For the first time in twenty years I was almost at peace with myself—in a negative way, I suppose, but really rather marvellous, you know. I knew what I could expect from life, and what there wasn't any use hoping for. I'd reached the point where I could be reasonable about things. Time, too, you'll admit. Then you came. And my little system went to pieces."

"It couldn't have been a very stable one," Norah said.

He looked at her with something close to contempt in his eyes. "I don't know why I love you, Norah," he said. "In spite of your Celtic blood you're an unpleasantly rational little beast whenever it suits your purposes to be. Have you ever looked at yourself—literally, I mean—in a mirror?"

"But of course. Lots of times," Norah confessed.

"And you ask me why I'm in love with you!"

Norah could not help smiling. "I'm flattered, Brian," she said. "But I didn't ask you why you were in love with me. I asked you if it were such a dreadful thing."

"Why did you put on that dress tonight?"

The sudden question caught her off guard. "Because I was hoping you'd come," she blurted out, without thinking.

"And because you know that everything is settled between us—because we're such good friends!" His voice shook with anger. "You know I won't take advantage of you, won't make love to you because you're helpless and alone. And knowing that, you deliberately make yourself as beautiful as you can and then casually invite me to stay the night—in an arm-chair!"

He turned away and caught up his sheepskin coat. "Keep a good fire on," he said. "It's a cold night."

She watched him while he buttoned up his coat and drew his fur cap down close over his ears. "I'm sorry, Brian," she said almost inaudibly.

He opened the door and stood on the threshold. The light from the kitchen lamp streamed out on a witches' dance of whirling snow, and a sudden gust of wind swept across the floor and curled around

Norah's legs. Somewhere, far away, an eerie, blood-tingling shriek rose high and shrill, hung quivering for a moment on the ear-drums, and fled with the storm beyond hearing. Only the wind in the telephone wires—or the triumphant voice of evil and hate and destruction, the voice of the storm god greeting his prey? Norah took a quick step forward.

"Brian," she said, "I won't let you go."

He stood in the open doorway, looking at her with sombre eyes. "Norah, do you know what you're saying?"

For a long minute they stood facing each other. The wind rose in a wild crescendo, a cloud of snow whirled in through the open doorway. Somewhere a loose board banged against the side of the house with the explosive force of gunshot.

Norah moved forward, caught Brian by the arm, and drew him inside.

"Yes, Brian," she said, "I know what I'm saying."

Deliberately she closed the door.

CHAPTER 14

A FLOOD OF SUNSHINE POURED ACROSS THE WILDERNESS OF white, lighting it with a cold dazzling brilliance which hurt the eyeballs. There was no wind, and no sound anywhere. The earth lay silent and dead under the profound covering of snow; so silent, so dead, that it seemed beyond reason to think that it should ever live again. On the surface of the snow nothing moved, except plumes of smoke which here and there across the great whiteness rose straight into the air, to disintegrate in the higher atmospheric levels. The plumes of smoke marked the dwelling places where all life which survived the storm was concentrated. Beyond those narrow confines it did not seem possible that life could exist. Standing at her kitchen door, Norah counted a dozen such plumes rising from widely separated points on the circle of white; and beyond the last upcurling she saw the six elevators of Twin Buttes, standing gaunt and lonely against a background which was half snow and half chill blue sky, remote impersonal landmarks in the great desolation.

But it was good to see the sun again, good to know that it could still shine. It was good to hear nothing at all except Phillip's cries from somewhere inside the house, and the sound of her own breathing; good to escape if only for a moment from those spectres of imagination which haunted her when she had no external objects to distract her faculties. Because she did not want to go back into the house she spent a little time trying to visualize what lay beneath the great mounds of snow which here and there thrust themselves above the level surface spreading away on every side. The garage was easy to find, for the crazy little weather-cock Jim had nailed to the ridge-pole was still visible; and the highest of the hedges thrust

a few bare branches above its enveloping blanket. Two of the machine-sheds had completely vanished, so completely that Norah doubted if she could point to where they stood. From where she was standing she could see only the roof of the barn; the wall facing her was out of sight behind a great drift. Even the house, in spite of the protection which the hedges afforded it, was banked high with snow on three sides; in places the ground-floor windows were hidden almost to the top.

For an hour or more Norah had been shovelling a pathway from the kitchen door. She had stopped quite suddenly; after all, what was the use of clearing a pathway which could lead nowhere? Now she stood in the doorway, crinkling her eyes in the harsh glare of sunlight, chilly in spite of her exertions, for the air was cold and penetrating.

It was idle to look along the road leading to the highway for any sign of life. She would see none for several hours yet. But her eyes persisted in straying there. Life had moved along that road only a short time ago. Weary Rivers had called early in the morning, leading his sorrel horse—'mustang', Weary called him. He had gone on to town almost immediately for supplies, for there was hardly any milk in the house now and no fresh meat. But it would be near evening before he got back. Everywhere, so the radio said, the roads were blocked. The few available snowploughs were struggling to clear the main highways. But people were warned that days must pass before traffic could move freely over roads and railways; days, too, before the telephone and power lines could be repaired.

"We own the phone line ourselves," Weary had explained to Norah. "Co-Op, sort of. And Albert Cliff's trouble-shooter. But he won't be up and around for two weeks yet. Figger the line'll just have to stay bust. Unless, of course, somebody with the know-how goes over to Albert's for the tools and gets to work."

The sun was shining and the wind had dropped. Norah was not afraid any more. But the sunshine could not entirely banish the mood of deep depression which afflicted her. If only Brian had come back things might have been different. More complicated, perhaps, but exhilarating. But Brian had ridden away in a wild

dawn three days ago and he had not come back. He had sent Weary Rivers instead. Norah had dreaded Brian's returning, and had tried to dissuade him, but his last word had been a promise for the next day. When Weary had come in Brian's place this morning, Norah had felt at first disappointment, and afterwards a queer sense of injured pride. Now, having looked at the landscape till her eyes were hot and sore, she went back into the house and sat down in the arm-chair, Jim's chair, behind the heater in the living-room, and fell to musing.

Why hadn't Brian come back? Weary had had no explanation to offer, feeling, apparently, that none was needed. "Brian, he said for me to come over. Figger he didn't feel up to it himself."

"Is he sick?" Norah had asked.

"Not so far as I could see. Just quieter than usual."

Why hadn't Brian felt up to coming back himself? Was he suffering from a sudden attack of conscience? Norah did not think so. You didn't associate conscience with Brian Malory. Or had he—and this was the most disturbing thought of all—found her less than adequate? She recalled some words of his which at the time of speaking had seemed irrelevant: "There are so many subtleties, Norah, that you don't appreciate." Now they did not seem so irrelevant. He had ridden away as soon as he conveniently could, and had not come back.

In herself she felt no sense of guilt. Had Brian come back she would have let him make love to her again with no sense of guilt. But there was an odd disquiet in her which she could neither account for nor suppress. Perhaps the disquiet was there because she did not want to think about Jim.

She felt no sense of guilt. She was sure of that—so sure that she told herself over and over again, I've done nothing to be ashamed of. Morality was a relative thing. She was not promiscuous. She had never given herself to any man before, except Jim. Not many girls who had lived through the war years in a large city were as continent as she. Once she had let a man, an Australian flyer, take her to his room in a dingy hotel on a back street. Things had been bad that day at home, and she had been feeling more than usually

depressed and lonely. In his room he had offered her a drink. She had taken a sip and burst into tears. The Australian had been embarrassed and appalled. He had taken her to a movie and home by eleven o'clock. He hadn't even kissed her good night, and she had cried about that afterwards.

No, she wasn't promiscuous. But the suppression of natural impulses was a denial of one's right to happiness, so someone had said. She wanted Brian and he had wanted her; she had given herself to him freely. True, she had not enjoyed the experience as much as she had expected. But it wasn't a matter of conscience or anything like that, only of inexperience. All men (she had read this somewhere) had in them tendencies which women regarded as abnormal. In Brian the tendencies were not controlled. He had shocked her profoundly at first. Excited her, too, in a way Jim never had. Next time, she told herself, she would know what to expect, be able to meet Brian half-way. And she wanted him—wanted him desperately "Lover, come back!" she sang softly, "lover, come back!"

She broke off horrified. Lover come back! And if he did she would reject him. Suddenly she was sure. A terrifying, exotic lover; but beyond the act itself there was nothing. For no reason at all, certainly not one rooted in her thinking, Brian's personality seemed to dissolve; it was a hollow shell which in its dissolution revealed the emptiness at its centre. Revelations always came to Norah that way, breaking in unprompted and unforeseen upon the reasoned processes of the mind, destroying on the instant conclusions built up through a seemingly fool-proof system of logic. The plain fact of the matter—a fact unsupported by any evidence in reason—was that she did not want to see Brian again. Because whenever she thought of Brian she did not like to think about Jim. "Lover, come back," she sang, but it was Jim she wanted, the man whom she had betrayed. There was no other word you could use. "I am a fallen woman," she said, and laughed out loud.

But it was true, no matter how hard she laughed. The physical act of love was in itself nothing. Adultery was not a pretty name, but the name was nothing. It was the motive behind the act which alone had meaning. The act was nothing; but the motive had been

base. For she didn't love Brian Malory, she loved Jim. Giving yourself to a man you loved, no matter what the circumstances, wasn't infidelity. But in giving herself to Brian she had been disloyal to her instincts for the sake of a cheap physical thrill. And for the time being, tormenting herself with a kind of masochistic intent, Norah refused to take refuge in the obvious excuse that she had been afraid, that she had let Brian possess her body because that was the price of his staying. She *had* been afraid, of course,—of the storm, the loneliness—but she had not been a woman terrified into participation in an act which she regarded with repulsion. She had been afraid; but she had put on the fine underwear and the red dress and painted her mouth like a harlot's.

She started up from the chair, real terror draining the blood from her face. Phillip had disappeared from the room, and she realized that for the past ten minutes at least she had heard no sound in the house except the ticking of the clock on the living-room table. She called his name loudly and rushed from room to room, downstairs and up. Then without waiting to snatch up a coat she hurried outside and called again in a voice so high and shrill that she hardly recognized it as her own.

Phillip answered her at once, and his "Hi, Mummy" sent the blood surging back through her veins in a great tide so that she had to clutch the door-jamb for support. Then she floundered half-sobbing through the great drifts to where she could just see the top of his curly head above the surface of the snow.

He was sitting listlessly at the bottom of a small hole he had dug with his toy shovel in the side of a drift. When she picked him up he began to cry.

"I'm cold, Mummy," he said. He was wearing only overalls and sweater and his face was blue. Norah held him close and almost ran back to the house.

"Oh, Phillip," she cried, "why did you go out? I told you that you mustn't. It's much too cold! What will Daddy think when he hears?" And all the time she was piling wood and coal into the heater, working in a kind of frenzy, for she had allowed the fire

to burn low, and wondering in a confused way how she could most quickly warm Phillip's chilled little body.

"I forgot, Mummy. Please don't tell Daddy."

"Of course I won't tell Daddy, Phillip. But why didn't you come in when you got so cold?"

"I was tired," he said.

She undressed him quickly and tumbled him into his cot with a hot-water bottle at his feet. He protested loudly, and his lamentations comforted Norah. But he did not cry for long. Soon he fell asleep and Norah breathed easily again. He had a touch of fever though, as she could tell just by looking at him, and she could not help feeling a little bit worried. He shouldn't have been so tired. But he had had restless nights lately, so that perhaps his fatigue was not abnormal. Thank God she had noticed his disappearance so soon! He couldn't have been outside for more than ten or fifteen minutes at most.

Phillip slept quietly for an hour, and woke in time for lunch. He did not want anything to eat, but Norah persuaded him to swallow a little chicken soup. "Daddy will ask how you've eaten your meals," she explained, feeling a little ashamed of invoking Jim's authority to command Phillip's co-operation. And for Daddy's sake, and the sake of the wonderful toy on wheels, Phillip reluctantly choked down a few mouthfuls of food.

Afterwards he played with his toys without enthusiasm, and with several violent outbursts of temper which were not characteristic of him. When he dozed off again late in the afternoon he tossed restlessly for a time and talked in his sleep. But presently he seemed to settle down. His breathing, Norah was relieved to observe, was quite regular, although a little more rapid than usual. She wished that she had asked Weary to get a prescription of some kind from Dr. Harrington in Twin Buttes—sulpha, perhaps. But if Phillip were still unwell tomorrow, Weary, she knew, would go to town for her again.

Weary reached the house just before supper-time. His face, usually ruddy, was white and drawn and his thin shoulders drooped.

"Had to break trail for the nag most of the way," he explained.

briefly. "That's the trouble with horses, they hold you up when you want to get anywheres in a hurry. The roads is terrible. Snow-plough ain't hardly been this side of town yet. More snow than I've seen in forty years."

He had brought supplies: tinned milk and fresh meat mostly, and a few cans of fruit-juice. "They've got grub rationed in the stores," he said. "Figger there's enough in town to last three-four days if folks ain't fussy about what they eat. Mebbe the trains will be runnin' the end of the week, mebbe not. Anyways, some folks is goin' on a diet whether they like it or not." And Weary chuckled half-heartedly.

Norah pressed him to stay for supper, but he waited only long enough to drink a cup of coffee. "Got some stuff on the nag for Stoddards," he explained. "I better get over there soon as I can. They're right out of everythin' and they got three kids. Another comin'."

"Do you think you could come again tomorrow, Weary?" Norah asked hesitantly. "Phillip isn't very well this evening and I'm a little worried. Probably he'll be all right in the morning, but there's a chance I might need some medicine."

"I'll be here," Weary assured her. "My old nag is pretty well all wore out but I'll get the loan of Albert Cliff's pinto. I'm doin' the chores over there account of they're both in Twin Buttes. Got a mouth like cement, the pinto has, and he locomotes like a camel. But he's tough. Tough and mean."

Norah regarded Weary affectionately. The impression she had formed the day she met him was being confirmed. Weary was loyal, dependable, a man you could count on. He had all the prosaic virtues Brian Malory lacked.

"Will you be seeing Brian?" she asked casually.

Weary shook his head. "Don't figger on it. He said he wouldn't be round for a day or two. Didn't say why, though. Brian's like that—keeps his lip buttoned pretty tight."

He rode away soon afterwards into a night of stillness and pale stars. Norah boiled herself an egg, ate it and two slices of toast without relish, and wondered if she would ever feel really hungry for

food again. After she had washed the few dishes she had used and tidied the kitchen she sat down in the chair behind the heater and tried to read. But the words on the page kept slipping away from her, and presently she laid the book aside. She started then to write a letter to Uncle James, but after the first page could think of nothing to say. At nine o'clock she got ready for bed.

Phillip was still sleeping quietly, though his skin felt hot to her hand. A sleep was what he needed most of all. If he slept the night through he would be fine in the morning. A good sleep was what she needed herself, for she was very tired. But she lay awake a long time, wondering about tomorrow. When she fell asleep at last it was a drifting away into a world of incessant nightmare where rest was impossible, unconsciousness a delirium of fear.

Phillip's scream awakened her. A scream high-pitched and full of anguish such as she had never heard from his lips before. She started up wildly and scrambled to light the lamp which tonight she had foolishly extinguished. Phillip was sitting bolt upright in bed, his little fists hard clenched, staring straight ahead of him with eyes that saw nothing within the limits of the room, but some horror lying far beyond.

"Mummy!" he screamed, "Mummy!"

Norah caught him in her arms and crushed him close. "It's all right, Phillip," she crooned over and over again. "It's all right. Mummy's here, Mummy's here."

But she knew that he did not see her at all, did not know that she was there. For the moment she could not reach him, he was beyond the range of human contact. His body was hot, and rigid with terror, his eyes staring, fixed and blind.

"Mummy!" he screamed again, "oh, Mummy!"

She picked him up and carried him about the room, speaking to him softly at first, then in a voice which was almost a shout. Presently his body relaxed, and the queer frightened look in his eyes softened perceptibly.

"Would you like a drink, Phillip?" Norah said, trying hard to speak in her natural voice.

Phillip was crying now, in harsh choking sobs. "Drink, Mummy, drink," he said.

She brought him a cup of water. He gulped it noisily, eagerly, and asked for more. His little body seemed all on fire now, his breathing quick and hard. "Oh, God," Norah prayed silently, "don't let him be sick—don't let him be sick!" But he was sick now, she knew that. How sick she had no way of guessing.

He settled down after a while and fell into a seemingly sound sleep. Looking at him, Norah was sure he was better. He had had a bad nightmare, that was all. But his breathing worried her, it was much too rapid to be natural. His cheeks were flushed so that he looked deceptively healthy. Perhaps if he had a good sweat—Aunt Lucy's unfailing remedy for every ailment—he would feel all right in the morning. She piled more blankets on the cot and stoked up the fire. Then she sat down in the armchair and prepared to stay awake the rest of the night. If she went back to the couch she might fall asleep.

Once she dozed off for a short time. Again that shrill terror-stricken scream awakened her. Again, for what seemed an eternity, she fought to bring Phillip back to sanity. When the struggle ended Norah was limp and exhausted. She prayed desperately on her knees that morning would come soon. For now she moved in the shadow of a very great fear, a fear such as she had never known before, not even when the bombers had roared high overhead in the light of the full moon and unloaded their cargoes of death all around her.

Fear was of different kinds. Fear for yourself was insignificant by comparison with the fear you felt for someone you loved. And a small boy was so helpless, so bewildered, so dependent on others. Pain and suffering were things he didn't understand—and neither do I, Norah thought parenthetically. He didn't understand either—and this was nearly the hardest thing of all for her to bear—why his Mummy couldn't make things all right immediately. Education, Norah philosophized, was learning to accept the existence of pain. Phillip's education was beginning. But philosophy didn't banish fear, not the kind Norah felt, anyway. For looking back over the past

few days she could not deny that Phillip's illness was the logical culmination of events which judged on one level, the level of rationality, were no more than unfortunate coincidences, but on another level the carrying to a conclusion of a carefully conceived plan, a plan to which men's eyes were blinded because it had no place in the beneficent universe they wanted to believe in.

But that way madness lay. Madness which the sunlight marking the advent of the day dissipated in its dazzling enchantment. Day brought a lift of heart, and the reassertion of the rational view of things. At once the fears of night-time receded into the domain of the illogical and fantastic, which now that the sun was shining Norah would have no truck with. You had to believe in yourself, in your ability to master whatever opposed you. You had to believe in yourself, if you were to survive. Phillip was ill; even the sunlight could not banish the fact. Only, when the sun shone you knew that his illness could be beaten, it was not something inexorably decreed by alien and sinister forces against which man was powerless to fight. Phillip was ill; but given proper treatment he would be on his feet in no time at all.

Looking at him, even in the sunlight Norah was not so sure. His fever had gone down, but his breathing was irregular and there was an alarming rattle in his chest. He would not eat any breakfast, not even when Norah invoked Jim's authority, though he drank a glass of orange-juice eagerly. He did not seem to feel pain anywhere and that, she felt, was a good sign. But he was still very tired and he seemed to have lost weight overnight. He looked white and thin, his face small against the big pillow Norah had placed under his head to make breathing easier. He wanted to get up, but did not protest very much when Norah said no very firmly. He was not interested in playing with any of his toys. He wanted Norah to sing to him, and for nearly an hour she sang his favourite nursery rhymes. When he fell asleep at last Norah was almost exhausted.

She wished that Weary would come. She would ask him to see the doctor in Twin Buttes. Harrington his name was, an Old Country man who drank more than was good for him, so people said. But he was an excellent doctor. Perhaps Dr. Harrington would come

out himself, for surely it would be possible to travel now by sleigh. Or if not, he would send medicine. In the meantime Norah heated a kettle with menthol crystals in it and set it alongside Phillip's cot. It was a nuisance having to re-heat the kettle every few minutes, but the steam should help Phillip's breathing.

When Weary came in mid-morning he found Norah almost distracted. Phillip was raving again. When at last he lay quiet and exhausted, his face no longer white but burning with the most intense fever, Norah turned to Weary, standing anxious and dumb at her side, and caught his arm.

"Weary, you've got to get the doctor!" she cried. "You've got to! Tell him that Phillip is awfully sick! Tell him he . . . he's . . ."

But she could not say the dreadful word which hovered on her lips. Weary's face crinkled into lines of sympathetic apprehension.

"I'll get him here if I have to hog-tie him," he said. "But don't you worry, Norah. Kids is like this, they act up just to scare you. One minute they're out cold, the next raisin' hell all over the place. I'll see that Doc Harrington gets here though, if I have to carry him tandem. But we'll be pretty late."

"I don't care how late you are," Norah said passionately. "But bring him, Weary—please bring him!"

Weary rode away without waiting for a cup of coffee. Norah watched his floundering progress for a short time, then returned to her vigil. She did not dare to leave Phillip's bedside for more than a few minutes. She kept the menthol kettle steaming, and put a mustard plaster on Phillip's chest, hating to do so for he was so hot already and cried bitterly, but desperate to alleviate the hideous wheezing rattle which marked his every breath. And she sang to him till she was hoarse. But at least her activity relieved her from the compulsion of fearful speculation which even a moment's idleness imposed upon her. All her attention was concentrated on the frail form on the cot, on making the little body as comfortable as she could; above all, on relieving Phillip's anguish of mind prompted by the hideous recurring nightmares of delirium, from which, so it seemed, it was becoming more and more difficult to bring him back to sanity.

If only the doctor would come! If only she could pass on the responsibility for Phillip's well-being—she would not say his life, even to herself—to someone more capable of assuming it! She wished that she had asked Weary to stop in at the McKinley place on his way to town. Mrs. McKinley, knowing that Phillip was ill and Norah alone, would have come at once, no matter how great the difficulty of battling one's way over miles of snow-blocked roads. Mrs. McKinley was that kind of woman. She was, too, a woman wise in the ways of sickness. All women who had lived on the prairies for many years shared that wisdom. Norah knew that she could not face the hardship and terror of another night by herself. Not with Phillip really ill. However hard she tried to convince herself otherwise, she knew that Phillip was very ill indeed.

He slept fitfully most of the morning. In his periods of waking he drank a good deal of water, but consistently refused milk or food. And there was no more fruit-juice in the house. By mid-afternoon the fever seemed to have gone down a little—Norah didn't have a thermometer so couldn't be sure—but his cough was worse. Each spasm racked his whole body now, so that Norah had to hold him upright until the bout was over, and afterwards wipe the rusty brown sputum from his lips. He wanted Jim. "When will Daddy be home?" he asked over and over again. It was significant, Norah could not help thinking, that he did not ask any more about the wonderful toy on wheels, the jeep or the dump truck which he had prayed God to send through Daddy.

When, late in the afternoon, there was a loud knock on the door, Norah leapt up from the chair in which she had been dozing; with an exclamation in which relief and apprehension were oddly compounded. The doctor was here—now she would know the worst. But the sensation of relief predominated, so that when she opened the door and saw Gail Anderson on the threshold she felt a quick surge of resentment and despair. What she felt must have shown in her face, for Gail spoke uncertainly.

"Hello, Norah. I knew you were alone so I thought I'd drop in. Silly, isn't it, to talk of dropping in on a day like this?"

Norah held the door open wide and Gail came into the kitchen,

shaking the snow from her heavy moccasins. "I snow-shoed over," she explained. "Something we don't do very often in this country. Mr. Olafson had an old pair of snow-shoes hanging out in the barn. My legs ache."

She looked at Norah closely. "Norah, what's wrong?"

"It's Phillip," Norah said. "He's sick."

Gail took off her fur-lined parka and hung it on the hook behind the kitchen door. She was wearing a plaid shirt and slacks. "I'm terribly sorry, Norah," she said. "And you've been alone?"

"Alone," Norah said. Suddenly, to her horrified embarrassment, she burst into tears.

Gail came close and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Cheer up, Norah," she said. "You aren't alone now. I'll stay with you as long as you want me to."

Norah wiped her eyes and tried to smile. "I'm being awfully silly, I know," she said. "But I've been so worried. Weary's gone for the doctor."

"Is Phillip very sick?"

"Come and see."

They went into the living-room. Phillip was asleep now, his face flushed and swollen, his breath coming in quick irregular gasps. Gail put her hand on his forehead and looked at him for a minute without speaking.

"Youngsters fool you so often," she said at last. "They seem to be so much sicker than they really are. And they get better in no time at all."

Her voice lacked conviction. "I hope you're right," Norah said dully.

"Look here, Norah," Gail said, with decision this time, "why don't you go upstairs and lie down? Sleep if you can. You're all in, and no wonder. I'll take charge. I've looked after lots of sick children in my day. You learn how, in a family of ten."

Norah shook her head. "Thanks, Gail, but I know I wouldn't be able to sleep. Not until the doctor has been here. I'd just toss and be miserable."

"Then I'd like a cup of tea," Gail said. "Do you mind?"

"Oh, Gail," Norah said, flustered. "I should have asked you." They went back to the kitchen. Norah put the kettle on the stove and busied herself setting out cups, sugar, condensed milk. She was feeling better already. Gail's blunt matter-of-factness which in the past she had found so offensive now had a tonic effect. Gail helped you keep your feet on the ground, helped you look at things realistically. And getting tea for a guest was something to do. It broke the oppressive monotony of waiting and wondering.

Gail was sitting in the chair beside the stove. She seemed restless, oddly ill at ease. Now she stood up and lit a cigarette. Her fingers shook visibly. Her face did not look the way it usually did. The features had not changed—the flaring red mouth, the green eyes under thin arched brows. But the effect was not the same. Gail's face was softer somehow, more human. She flicked the match on to the top of the stove and breathed a cloud of smoke through her nostrils. Suddenly she turned to Norah.

"I'm going away," she said. "With Brian."

CHAPTER 15

FOR A LONG MINUTE NORAH STARED AT GAIL, WORDLESS AND uncomprehending. Gail was looking out of the window, at the dreary patch of patterned frost which cut off the sunlight, looking far away into some distance which the eye of sight could not penetrate.

"He's come back to me, Norah," she said.

"But I don't understand," Norah stammered. "He . . . he . . ."

She almost said, "He was here three days ago," but stopped just in time. Then, because she could think of nothing else to say, "Where are you going?" she asked.

"I don't know," Gail said. "It doesn't matter."

She turned from the window. Suddenly words seemed to burst from her in a way of speaking alien to the Gail Anderson whom Norah had hitherto known.

"I *hated* you, Norah—hated you from the first minute I saw you—hated you because I thought Brian had fallen in love with you. Oh, I haven't any illusions about Brian. He's always had a wandering eye. But don't you see, Norah, I'm in love with him! I've loved him, I think, since the day I met him, a long time ago. I wanted him—wanted him so much that nothing else in the world mattered."

Norah nodded dumbly. She could not put what she wanted to say into words. But she knew how Gail had felt. She had felt the same way the day she met Jim.

"When the war came Brian joined up at once. I enlisted, too, as soon as I could. I hoped we could be together sometimes. Then he was discharged—his heart, they said—and I was trapped. I didn't see him for two years."

"Were you lovers?"

Norah knew that she had no right to ask the question. But she could not help herself. And she did not think that Gail would mind.

"But, of course, Norah, almost from the beginning. Marriage didn't seem to matter then. I thought he'd never leave me. I came back here after the war, just to be near him. You understand that? Oh, there was talk. Lots of people thought I wasn't fit to teach their children. But they didn't know anything definite—just the usual gossip. And besides," she added, almost naively, "I'm a good teacher. And good teachers are hard to get these days."

Norah nodded silently. She was still too bewildered to think clearly. She waited in terrified anticipation of what Gail would say next.

"I was a bit worried about the concealment, of course," Gail said. "It gets you down in the end. But I was happy, so long as Brian was near me. Then you came."

"But don't you see, Gail," Norah said, "I had nothing to do with—whatever happened."

"You're beautiful, Norah," Gail said. "You had that much to do with it."

Norah stared at her, for the moment uncomprehending. "But you had no reason to hate me," she said.

"I couldn't help myself. How would *you* feel towards a woman you thought was taking Jim away from you—even though she didn't mean to?"

"But I did think . . ." Norah began.

But she could not go on, could not reveal the folly of those early conjectures which had led her to believe that there was something between Jim and Gail.

"I know," Gail said. "You thought I was in love with Jim, thought I was trying to take him from you. I knew how you felt and didn't care. Maybe I even enjoyed hurting you. But I was unhappy, terribly unhappy. And I was afraid."

Norah turned away. She could not trust herself to look at Gail any more. "It wasn't you so much," she said at last. "But I got the impression, somehow, that people had expected you and Jim . . ."

"People—people!" Gail said contemptuously. "That's what they

wanted, of course. So nice if that wild Anderson girl would marry steady solid Jim Armstrong and settle down. So good for each other! And we did go together for a while—a long time ago. But it never meant anything—just companionship.”

Resentment, capricious and unreasonable, stirred in Norah. First she had disliked Gail because she wanted Jim, now she disliked her because she hadn’t wanted him. But she did not express her resentment in words. There was no need to. It was uncanny the way Gail could sense what was passing through her mind.

“Jim’s fine,” Gail said. “Too fine for me. Brian and I are soul-mates. Deep calling to deep.” She smiled faintly. “Both hollow at the core. I’ve no illusions—about either of us. Only—I happen to love him.”

“But when did Brian—come back?”

“Last night,” Gail said. “I went snow-shoeing yesterday afternoon. I met him—he was on his way over. We went back to his place instead.”

“Why are you going away?”

“He wants me to go. He’s come into some money, I think. We’re going for a trip, a long trip. Then we’ll settle down somewhere—the coast, I think. We couldn’t come back here.”

“Will you get married?”

“If Brian wants to. It doesn’t matter.”

There was that about Gail Anderson which put her outside the range of Norah’s experience, a quality which was a compound of naked sensuality and genuine unearthliness, identifying her spiritually with the amoral pagan deities of ancient legend. Her body was a fitting house for her soul. And in Brian she had found a worthy mate.

Or had she? There was no order in the progression of Norah’s thoughts; they were confused, disjointed; they did not follow one another in any logical sequence. But of one thing she was now sure. The blonde in the dressing-room at Paradise Vale school-house had been right. Brian Malory was phony Irish, a professional Celt in shabby exile trading on his romantic heritage and the tag-ends of poets for his personality. The man whom the world knew was a com-

pound of romantic furbishings extraneous to the real self beneath; the real self was worthless, a hollow shell.

Norah could not think clearly, but none the less things were falling into place. From the first, Brian Malory had needed her for the satisfaction of his colossal egotism. He had been interested in her little as a fellow-countrymen, and not at all as a lonely woman with whom he had interests in common; but from the first as an attractive potential mistress whose married status would add piquancy to the act of seduction. He was not even driven by any overwhelming physical desire. He had loved her under false pretences. Now he had gone back to the woman who could give him the greater physical satisfaction, who was no doubt more amenable to his peculiar whims. And Gail had taken him back, ignorant of what he had done. But perhaps knowing would have made no difference. Gail was that kind of woman.

Norah looked at Gail and said none of the things which were passing through her mind. It was in her power to destroy with a word the happiness shining incongruously in Gail's eyes, in her power to bring back the old hardness ten times intensified, the bitter curl to the red mouth. To do so would be no less than justice. In her way Gail was as ruthless as Brian Malory. She had been ready to destroy other peoples' happiness, Norah's happiness, in order to achieve her own. Like Brian she was the slave of her own inordinate egotism.

But Norah did not speak. Later, she knew, she would be glad that she had not spoken. Now she had to fight hard against the impulse. But Gail really loved Brian. Loved him with a passion, an intensity which were proof against everything he had made her suffer. Her love had in it some of the qualities of greatness. It was more, much more, than mere sensuality; it was a thing so strong, so single-hearted that it seemed almost to justify whatever moral crimes had been committed in its name. Norah said nothing at all.

They drank their tea slowly. Norah sat near the living-room door so that if Phillip moved or spoke she would hear him at once. Just now he was quiet; and Norah was glad to think that he was resting. Rest was what he needed to restore his strength.

"You haven't heard from Jim?"

Norah set her cup on the table and ran her hand across her forehead. "How could I? He called the first night he was away. Then the line went down. I don't even know if his father is alive or dead. I don't know when he'll be home."

"Not for days yet," Gail said. "The passes are still blocked."

"The planes should be flying soon," Norah said. "If he knew what things were like here he might even try to charter a private plane. Only, they say it's snowing again in the mountains."

"You could send a telegram. He'd get back here somehow if he knew."

"But I don't even know where he's staying. And besides, he has troubles enough."

"You have his father's address, haven't you?" Gail said.

Yes, Norah had his father's address. And Weary, however much his nickname betokened his condition, would ride back to Twin Buttes to send a telegram for her. But suppose that Jim did get back quickly somehow, in answer to her summons? Suppose he fled from the bedside of his dying father back home to find life proceeding in a way almost normal, the neighbours at Norah's service, Phillip almost well again—for children always bounced back so quickly—what would he think? What would he say to her? She would have failed him—and herself—miserably, in the first major crisis which he had ever trusted her to face. Whatever his fears about her they would be confirmed. Thereafter she could never hope for his wholehearted respect. No, she could not send a telegram. Not unless the doctor insisted. And she was sure that once he had examined Phillip he would do nothing of the kind.

"I'd send it if I were you," Gail said. "Phillip's pretty sick. I think he's got pneumonia."

The room was warm. There was no reason why Norah should have felt cold all over. She got up quickly and began to put more wood in the fire.

"The doctor will be here soon," she said stiffly. "He'll tell me what to do."

She tried to be casual, matter-of-fact. But she could not keep

back the tears any longer. She clung to Gail, sobbing. "Oh, Gail, why doesn't he come? Why doesn't he come!"

Gail's arm was about her waist, strong, comforting. "Cheer up, Norah," she said. "And do, please, lie down for a little while. You'll end up in a fine fit of hysterics if you don't."

But Norah wasn't listening to Gail. There were noises outside; she heard them, and nothing else. She rushed across the kitchen and flung the door wide.

"Weary!" she cried. "Weary! Is he here?"

Weary drooped on the threshold, a look of abject misery on his haggard face. "I'm awful sorry, Norah," he mumbled. "The doc, he can't make it till mornin'. There was a fire out north—two kids got burned. He had to go there first. But he sent out a bottle of dope. Said it'll bring down the fever. And he'll be out first thing in the mornin'."

Norah seized the package which Weary held out to her and in desperate irrational haste tore off the wrappings. "Sulpha!" she cried triumphantly. "He's to get it every three hours. We'll give him some right away."

"The best thing in the world to bring down the fever," Gail said with strained cheerfulness. "You give it to him, Norah. I'll look after Weary. He's in as bad shape as Phillip."

Norah hated to waken Phillip. She did so gently, talking in a low voice all the time. When his hysterical screaming had at last subsided, she forced a spoonful of medicine between his lips. "Dear God," she prayed, "make it work! Please, God, make it work!" It flashed across her mind that until these last few days she hadn't really prayed in nearly twenty years, not till she came to the prairies where, so Jim had said, there were no gods to pray to. Now she prayed as she had done when a little child—prayed wildly, almost incoherently, to a power beyond the human to make her son well.

She gave Phillip a drink and smoothed down the sheets before settling him in his cot. He fell asleep almost at once—he had not fully wakened up. And to Norah, praying for the miracle, watching his every movement with painful intentness, it seemed that already his breathing was a little easier.

"I think he's better now," she reported to Gail and Weary. "His breathing isn't quite so fast. If only he could get a good sleep!"

"Just the same," Gail interrupted drily, "I'd send that telegram if I were you."

But Norah had made up her mind. "In the morning, if Dr. Harrington thinks it necessary. But I'm sure he won't. I think the sulpha is having an effect already."

Gail looked at her, Norah thought, as if she were a little child. "Phillip needs to be watched," she said. "And you're tired out, Norah. I'll stay the night with you. You need some sleep."

"But what about . . ." Norah began. She had intended to say, "What about Brian?" Then remembering that Weary was present, she did not complete the sentence.

"The Olafsons?" Gail said quickly. "I told them I might not be back tonight."

"But Gail, you mustn't stay," Norah said. "Please don't. I'll manage."

She knew that the tone of her voice contradicted the meaning of her words. She had been hoping desperately that Gail would stay. If she hadn't offered to, Norah would have sent Weary to ask Mrs. McKinley to come over. But Gail was staying. She didn't even bother to answer Norah's conventional protest.

"I'll stay downstairs," Gail said. "You'll get into your bed and sleep. And you won't need to worry about anything at all."

Weary bolted some food and drank three cups of coffee. "Mrs. Cliff, she come home today," he said. "Figger I'll spend the night with her."

"Why, Weary!" Gail said. "At your age."

Surprisingly Weary did not blush, perhaps because his face was already so red from sun and frost-bite that no rush of blood could make itself manifest. "I figger at my age Mrs. Cliff won't be in no danger. But she's got a lot of chores to do. Cows to milk. Not like these here wheat farmers who ain't even got a hen around the place, let alone a herd of cows."

"That's marvellous of you, Weary," Gail said. "I know how you hate to milk."

"Sooner walk twenty mile in a blizzard or a dust storm any day," Weary admitted sadly. "Why folks milk cows when there's better milk to be got out of a can just be punchin' a hole in it beats me. But that's the way it is."

"I don't know how we'd ever get along without you, Weary," Norah said. "You're the Bayard of the prairies."

"What's that?" Weary said, puzzled and instantly suspicious.

"A very fine gentleman," Norah said. "So are you."

"Heck," Weary mumbled, "'taint much. All this runnin' around gives me somethin' to do."

He left when the last few bars of sunlight were streaking the horizon. Clouds had piled up in the north-west, but Weary dismissed them with a gesture.

"Snow's over for a day or two anyways," he said. "Those clouds don't mean anythin' in winter. I'll be round in the mornin', Norah, soon's I get those damn cows milked." And he rode off into the twilight, slowly, along the inadequate trail he had broken, which so far had been used by no one but himself.

It was a wonderful thing to have company for supper. Once Norah would have hated to spend an evening alone with Gail, but not now. For many things were now plain which had been mysteries before, and where there was no mystery there was no tension either. The remote, scornful Gail whom she had talked to fleetingly before had been a tormented unhappy woman, driven almost to distraction by the instability of a man who, however much the rational side of her might have tried to reject him, had sole command over her love. Now for the time at least she was free of doubt, free of heart-ache.

All through supper Gail talked with animation, mostly of Brian. Norah listened quietly. She was very tired, and did not want to talk. Besides, it was a kind of secret delight to know that with a word she could destroy a woman's happiness. She was one possessed of great and unusual power; and it pleased her to reflect that she was strong enough not to use it. She was enjoying, too, feelings of the most intense relief, for motives hitherto obscure, actions once incomprehensible, no longer puzzled her. Gail was not in love with Jim, Jim was not in love with Gail. This Norah knew with cer-

tainty. Brian Malory was the evil genius who had been responsible for her own and Gail's unhappiness. But not any longer. Norah had found Brian out for what he was. Too late, some conventionally minded people might have said, and at too great a price. But they would be wrong to say so. The price she had paid was small in comparison with what she had gained. Names had no meanings in themselves. Adultery had evil connotations, but the act itself had set her free to love Jim wholly and forever. Only, she wished that Brian Malory hadn't gone back to Gail almost immediately afterwards. One small part of her consciousness was affected by a sense of outrage. Malory had insulted her body. She found it hard to forgive him the slight.

Norah did not want to go to bed but Gail was insistent. "It's time Phillip had another dose," she said. "Watch me give it to him, then you'll know you can trust me."

Gail administered the spoonful of medicine expertly. Norah, watching every move, knew that Phillip would be in hands competent and gentle. His fever had gone down perceptibly; he did not scream when Gail awakened him. He seemed drowsy and indifferent, and he did not want a drink.

"We'll have to watch for a sulpha reaction," Gail said. "If he starts vomiting we'll have to stop the medicine. But it isn't likely."

Quite unexpectedly Norah found that she could no longer keep her eyes open. "I've just let go," she confessed to Gail. "If you hadn't come today I . . . I don't know what I'd have done."

"You'd have managed," Gail said. "It's just that now you feel you can relax."

"It's strange, Gail, but when things are bad you always seem to rally around. That day the madman came . . ."

Gail shook her head. "I was a beast about that afterwards. At the dance. Remember?"

"I remember," Norah said. "The way you danced with Jim. And he held you so close I was scared. Scared and mad!"

"You needn't have worried about Jim," Gail said. "He's beyond reach of anyone but you—the only one-woman man I've ever known."

But I was mad with Brian that night, mad clear through. There were so many things . . . the two of you together in his shack . . ."

"I know," Norah interrupted. "I thought you were upset that day, but I wasn't sure. You never gave things away."

"Anyway, I was furious. But Brian just laughed at me. So I took things out on you."

"So did Brian," Norah said, without quite having meant to.

Gail looked at her queerly. "You'd better be off now, Norah," she said. "I'll call you if there's need. But I know there won't be."

Reluctantly Norah went upstairs. Her body ached in every limb, she had a splitting pain in her head; but she knew that she would not sleep, not until the doctor came. Not until she knew that Phillip was all right.

She left the light burning, so as to be ready instantly if there should be a call from below. She tried to read for a while, but the pain in her head was severe and her eyes hurt. She closed them to shut out the light, and darkness enveloped her wholly. Darkness and a deep tranquillity. Darkness in which no creatures of nightmare moved to trouble her dreams. She slept sound and undisturbed, as she had not slept since Jim left her.

CHAPTER 16

DR. HARRINGTON OF EDINBURGH AND TWIN BUTTES WAS A BIG bluff man, red-faced and grizzled. As soon as Norah saw him she knew that everything was going to be all right. He was capable, experienced, the veteran country doctor of tradition and legend, to whom a seven-mile journey over roads seemingly impassable was a commonplace in the day's work. Oscar Lumley, the town drayman who ran a winter livery service on the rare occasions when there was call for it, had driven him out. Now the doctor stood in front of the kitchen range warming his big gnarled hands from its comfortable heat.

"Worst trip in thirty years," he grumbled in an accent which betrayed his Old Country origin. "Why do people always insist on taking sick in foul weather? Inconvenient for everybody. Most inconvenient!"

Norah had had the kettle boiling since early morning. On the few occasions at home when the doctor was expected, Aunt Lucy had always kept the kettle on the boil.

"I'll make a cup of tea, doctor," she said.

Dr. Harrington looked at her sharply. "Thank you. You should know how to make it. But I'd better look at the child first. I'll have a cup of tea before I leave."

"I'll have it ready for you, doctor," Gail Anderson said. "Good and strong too. Norah will take you in to Phillip."

The note of anxiety in Gail's voice did not escape Norah. She herself had seen no change in Phillip when she came down this morning after a long, long sleep, except that he did not seem to know her now. He had been sick during the night, Gail said; he

had vomited twice and she had stopped giving him the sulpha. But he showed no signs of fever now, only a great weariness, a disinclination even to turn his head. The fever had burned itself out, but the body which had contained it was exhausted. Rest, sleep, and he would be all right in a day or two. But as she led Dr. Harrington to Phillip's bedside her lips moved in prayer: "Oh, God, make him well! Make him well!"

Phillip lay on his back, white-faced, sunk in stupor. His breathing was still too fast, there was a horrid rattle in his chest, and rusty sputum had dried in the corners of his mouth. Norah hurriedly wiped the sputum away with her handkerchief.

Dr. Harrington set his black bag on a convenient chair and took out thermometer and stethoscope. Very gently he unfastened the buttons of Phillip's sleepers and placed the thermometer under his arm. "Just see that this stays in place, will you?" he said to Norah. "I'll go over his chest."

Norah held Phillip's arm against his side so that the thermometer rested firmly in the armpit. It was strange and terrifying how much he seemed to have wasted away in only three days. His ribs stood out clearly, the skin drawn tight over them, and the arm which she held was fragile as a match-stick. But he no longer felt hot to touch; warmer than usual, perhaps, but that would be on account of the room's temperature. She was afraid to risk his catching another chill and had kept a big fire on all morning. But he wasn't restless any more, the way he had been for two days past. He would be better soon. Indeed, it seemed almost foolish now to have insisted on the doctor's coming when there were so many serious cases needing attention. She must ask Dr. Harrington about the children who were burned. Only, Phillip didn't seem to know her, didn't hear her voice when she called his name. But perhaps he was just sleeping very heavily, tired out after his battle against fever and delirium.

Dr. Harrington laid aside his stethoscope. Now he was tapping Phillip's chest with those great knobby fingers—thump—thump—thump. The sound was loud in the quiet room. Now he was looking into his mouth, at the tongue whose pinkness was covered over by

a horrible thick brown fur, now lifting the eyelids to peer at the eyeballs beneath. Now he had taken the thermometer from under Phillip's arm and was holding it a few inches from his eyes. Norah wondered if the doctor were short-sighted. She waited apprehensively for him to speak.

Dr. Harrington put away the stethoscope with what seemed to Norah quite unnecessary deliberation. She did not dare to look in his face any more. Gail Anderson had come into the room and was standing just behind her. Now, with a shock of hideous fear, she felt Gail's hand on her shoulder.

"Phillip is a pretty sick boy, Mrs. Armstrong," Dr. Harrington said.

Norah's lips moved, but made no sound. Gail spoke for her. "Pneumonia?"

Norah, knew, without seeing, that Dr. Harrington had nodded his head. She got up then from her chair and for the first time in minutes looked at him directly.

"Should I send a wire to Jim?"

Dr. Harrington closed his bag. The small clicking sound seemed loud in the silence.

"At once, if you can reach him."

He came to her side then, and put his hand on her arm. "The trouble is his heart. He's been ill for a week, burning up for three days. He can't stand much more—and there's still some fever. The sulpha reaction is unfortunate."

"But can't you give him something?" Norah said desperately, knowing all the time the futility of her question.

Dr. Harrington shook his head. "Mrs. Armstrong, what your boy needs most of all is expert care. He must be closely watched. He can't get that kind of care here. He should be in hospital. We could give him oxygen then to relieve the strain on his heart."

He shrugged his shoulders, spread his hands wide. "Without oxygen . . ."

But they could never get Phillip to hospital. The nearest hospital was forty miles the other side of Twin Buttes. Even if the roads were open Phillip could never stand the trip. Norah knew that

without the doctor telling her so. She looked at him in dumb misery. Because he had failed her when she had been so confident of his help, her anguish was many times intensified. Again Gail spoke for her.

"But doctor," Gail said, "is there any way . . .?"

"One way," Dr. Harrington said. "Air-ambulance."

"Air-ambulance?" Norah echoed uncomprehendingly.

There was a quiver of excitement, of hope, in Gail's voice. "A plane from the city," she explained rapidly. "There's a service for outlying parts."

Norah remembered now. She had read many times of mercy flights made to bring the sick in urgent need of medical treatment to hospital, but she had always associated such flights with the far north, with sick Eskimos and Indians and missionaries and policemen. But here, in the middle of the prairies, it seemed unbelievable. And yet, why not? The nearest hospital was fifty miles away, half the width of Ireland!

"The ambulance operates in winter mostly," Gail went on. "If only the snow isn't too deep . . ."

"They'll be able to land all right," Dr. Harrington said. "The altitude won't be good for the boy, but the plane can fly low. It's a chance we have to take."

He went back to the kitchen and hurriedly drank the cup of tea which Gail had prepared for him. "How long to get back, Oscar?"

Oscar Lumley got up from the chair beside the range and pulled on his heavy mitts. "A long time, Doc. The plugs is all tired out."

For the first time, so it seemed to Norah, now watching closely, lines of worry showed in Dr. Harrington's red face. "If only there was someone we could send to town in a hurry," he said.

The miracle happened. A knock sounded on the door, hesitant, uncertain. Norah flew to open it. Weary Rivers stood looking at her out of tired, bloodshot eyes.

"Weary!" Norah cried, hysterical exultation in her voice. "Thank God you've come! Can you ride to town right away?"

Weary took off his fur cap and scratched his bald head. "Right away, Norah. Got my own nag this mornin'. What you want?"

Dr. Harrington was scribbling a note. "Send this telegram, Weary," he said. "It's urgent. And Mrs. Armstrong has one for you."

Norah took the pen and sheet of paper which Dr. Harrington pushed towards her. She sat down at the table and wrote with shaking hand, "Phillip very ill. Please come home at once. Norah." An absurd summons really. How could Jim come when the trains weren't running? Maybe he would charter a private plane. The regular air-service was still grounded, and she had heard something on the radio that morning about a new weather disturbance moving into the foothills. Another twelve hours and the grey pall would again be stretched across the prairies. Not even a private plane would try to get through.

But she felt strangely light of heart. Weary's coming had in it the magic of a direct intervention by the forces of good into the hitherto unbroken chain of catastrophic events which had brought her to the brink of tragedy. Weary would be in Twin Buttes in no time at all, for he would push his horse to the limit, over a road broken now to the highway by Oscar Lumley's sleigh. Soon the plane would come flying over the farm, its wings silver in the sunlight; it would land in the field just outside the house, its skis casting up great clouds of snow in a fine spray. Less than an hour afterwards Phillip would be in hospital, expert nurses guarding him, watching his every breath, ready to give him oxygen if he needed it. She hated to send the telegram to Jim. But, of course, he should know. At least she was justified in sending for him now. Dr. Harrington had commanded her to do so.

Weary tucked the messages into his wallet, fastened the wallet in the zippered breast-pocket of his wind-breaker and rode away. Dr. Harrington drank another cup of tea, more slowly this time, and wrote out a list of instructions.

"This will tell you what to do with the stuff I'm leaving," he said, speaking not to Norah but to Gail. "Phillip is a mighty sick youngster. Watch him closely and follow directions. Keep him propped up to help his breathing. If we have luck the ambulance should be here this afternoon."

When the doctor had gone, Norah went back to Phillip. He lay as he had lain all morning, in a sound sleep or coma, she did not know which. If only he would open his eyes, answer her when she called his name, look at her in such a way that she would know he recognized her! She sat down by the cot and began to sing in a low voice, "Rock-a-by, baby, in the tree top, when the wind blows the cradle will rock . . ."

Phillip stirred and turned his head ever so slightly on the high pillow. His eyelids flickered, lifted.

"Hi, Mummy," he said.

Norah bent over and kissed him gently on the forehead. "Hi, Phillip," she said. "Don't try to talk. Just lie quietly like a good little boy."

"Drink, Mummy."

Norah raised his head carefully and held a glass of water to his cracked lips. Phillip took a sip, tentatively, then another, eagerly. When the glass was half empty Norah lowered his head.

"Go to sleep, Phillip," she said.

"Sing some more. Sing Wee Willie Winky."

Norah sang softly, joyously, for her heart was uplifted. Phillip was getting better. She knew he was better. She could tell just by looking at him. And when presently Gail came into the room she could not contain herself. "Oh, Gail, he's better—ever so much better! He knows me!"

Gail looked closely at Phillip. "His breathing isn't quite so heavy," she said. "But remember what Dr. Harrington told us. It's his heart we have to watch."

Gail was wise to be cautious, Norah thought, wise not to agree too precipitately. All the same her eyes were shining. She too could see that Phillip was getting better. But, of course, there was danger still. You couldn't take chances with pneumonia.

There was nothing to do now except wait. Wait and hope that the plane would come soon. Wisely, Gail would not let Norah stay with Phillip.

"The house needs straightening up," she said. "If I were you I'd get busy and tidy it."

Norah flushed. "I know things are a mess, Gail. But honestly, I just haven't had time."

"Norah, don't be silly. Of course you haven't had time. Considering what you've had to put up with since Jim left it's a wonder the house looks as well as it does. I'm just trying to keep you busy, that's all. The psychological approach, you know. Too much thinking makes us mad."

Norah tied a kerchief around her head and picked up the broom. "I'll sweep the kitchen and upstairs," she said. "Not the living-room. The dust might be bad for Phillip."

She hesitated a moment, then asked curiously, "Does Brian know you're here?"

Gail nodded. "I told him I was coming. He didn't want me to, said I'd collapse in a snow-drift before I got here. But I came anyway. He'll be wondering, though. We were to meet each other last night."

Yes, Norah thought, Brian would be wondering. Wondering if Gail had learned the truth, wondering if he had lost her. But she said, "Gail, I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Gail said. "Brian will understand. And besides," she added with a faint smile, "he's stood me up lots of times. This will do him good."

Norah could not think of anything to say. "I'm worried, though," Gail went on. "I thought that when we didn't keep our . . . date"—she hesitated ever so slightly over the word—"he'd have come over, keeping an eye out for the body in the snow. I hope he's all right. You know how it is. The silliest ideas keep coming into your mind."

"I know, Gail."

Norah went about her house-cleaning. She worked with conscious deliberation, skimping nowhere, going into out-of-the-way corners, dusting the tops of shelves and cupboards, which, being invisible to the eye, she had hitherto tended to ignore. Gail was right; doing a job distracted the mind. When she thought to look at the clock it was near noon. Weary would have reached Twin Buttes by now and the telegrams would be on their way. The rescue plane—Norah could not think of it in less dramatic terms—might be tak-

ing off this very minute. It was a comfortable reflection, and she worked almost buoyantly, knowing that help was near.

She stopped presently to make lunch (sandwiches and coffee) for herself and Gail. Phillip slept on. Except for the occasional fit of coughing he had been quiet all morning. His pulse was weak but regular, his breathing easier. But he lay almost without movement, his face so shrunk, so wasted, that Norah hardly recognized it as the face of her son. She wondered what Jim would say when he saw him. At least he would know then that Norah's telegram had been justified. Of course, if Jim should not reach home for several days, things would be different. Now that Phillip had taken a turn for the better he would probably recover so quickly that by the time Jim saw him he would be almost his usual self again.

Norah had just finished putting away the lunch dishes when Brian Malory came. Gail was in the living-room with Phillip, and the door between living-room and kitchen was closed. When Norah opened the door in answer to his knock and saw him standing there she felt a momentary impulse of cold hate. Then almost at once she knew that she did not care. Whatever Brian Malory may have meant to her in the past, he mattered no longer. In surrendering to him she had unwittingly but in truth earned her freedom. She looked at him now, smiling, and her smile was almost natural. Natural and friendly. She did not say anything at first, for Brian gave her no chance. He was a man embarrassed and ashamed—you could see that at a glance—but impelled by some desperate urgency against which he had ceased to struggle.

"Norah, I'll explain to you—about what happened," he stammered. "Have you seen Gail?"

And now Norah was prepared, almost, to forgive Brian anything. For she knew that he was in love with Gail. He would never have humiliated himself this way unless he loved Gail. Whatever his deceptions, whatever his sensual aberrations, whatever his egotism, she could forgive them all. She nodded towards the living-room door.

"In there," she said.

He stood hesitantly on the threshold of the kitchen door, as if he were actually afraid to come in. Norah stepped closer and

smiled into his face. "Don't worry, Brian—about anything. I've forgotten all that happened. You forget too."

Her feelings were a confusion of pity and an emotion which approached the maternal. She marvelled at herself; she had never felt so much at ease with Brian before. Always in the past he had triumphed over her, but not now. She had defeated him, and for the moment the cost of her victory did not matter.

Brian did not say anything for a while. But he refused to meet her eyes. Presently he looked up. "Forgive me, Norah," he said.

"Why, of course, Brian. But it's not a matter of forgiving. Really it isn't. I'll tell Gail you're here."

She went in swiftly to the living-room. "Brian's here," she said to Gail. "You'd better go to him."

She sat down beside the cot, half-smiling to herself. Now at last she was on safe ground. Now at last she was free from the shackles of the past. There was no one in her life any more except Jim. Jim and Phillip. She had dismissed Brian with a word and a smile and neither had cost her any pain. She had forgiven him his betrayal of her, and the blatant insult which had followed. She was beyond his reach now, for always. He was going away and she would watch him go without regret, knowing that she did not need him, that no memories would linger to haunt her. And Brian, she knew was free of her. Out of hate and unreason and anger and sensuality had come wisdom and peace. Life made no sense, really.

Gail led Brian into the living-room. He came over to the cot and looked down at Phillip. Norah, watching his face, knew that he was shocked by what he saw.

"But in just a few days, Norah!" he said. "I can't believe it!"

"He's been very sick," Norah said in a thin voice. "He's better now."

She got up and went to the window. In the warm sunshine of the past two days the frost on the panes had melted in places so that she could look out now. The sunlight had withdrawn from the world. Over the sky a grey film had spread, a film through which the sun was faintly visible, a circle of pale yellow, shorn of its beauty and power. There were no separate clouds anywhere, only the sinister

grey film which seemed to thicken even as she looked. Soon it would be snowing again.

At once Norah's confidence evaporated and the great fear was with her. Suppose the plane did not come at all? Suppose the great storm struck again! Suppose Jim could not get through! Beyond this last thought her imagination refused to carry her. But she could not maintain the fight much longer, even with Gail to help.

There were more people in the kitchen. The McKinleys had arrived, Judd silent as always, Mrs. McKinley red-faced and exclamatory. The whole of Norah's little world seemed to be gathering under her roof. Just like a wake, she thought, and was appalled. Mrs. McKinley stood beside the kitchen stove peeling off layer after layer of heavy outer clothing. She talked without cessation as she did so.

"Heard from Weary only this mornin'—stopped in on his way over here and told us Phillip was sick. He should have told us before. You should have sent word over, Norah. Tight-mouthed like all you Old Country folk; keep your troubles to yourselves till you get in a real mess."

"But I had no way of telling you," Norah said. "Not after the line went down."

"Why didn't *you* tell us, Brian?" Mrs. McKinley demanded angrily. "Where you been the last three or four days? We ain't seen hide nor hair of you. Didn't Jim ask you to look after Norah?"

Malory's face flushed and he was at a loss for words. "Brian came four days ago," Norah said, triumphantly calm and self-possessed. "But he wasn't feeling well so I suggested he ask Weary to come in his place."

She was glad that Gail Anderson had stayed in the living-room with Phillip. Gail would have sensed the tension, she would have guessed at once that something had happened between Brian and Norah. Mrs. McKinley looked at Norah with gimlet eyes, but Norah was sure she suspected nothing.

"I'd like to see the kid," Mrs. McKinley said. "Maybe I can do something to help."

"He's better now," Norah said, leading the way into the living-room. "We're waiting for an air-ambulance."

Mrs. McKinley's eyes were sharp, scrutinizing. They missed nothing. "He's an awful sick kid," she said bluntly. "What did Doc Harrington say? Not that you can go much by what he says. Drinks like a fish even when he's on a case."

"He said we'd have to watch his heart."

"Most likely have a weak heart all his life," Mrs. McKinley conjectured. "If he pulls through."

She sat down in the chair by the cot and adjusted her skirts. "You go out and talk to the folks. I'll stay here a while. Better prop him up higher. He's breathin' kind of hard."

But Norah did not want to talk to anyone. She bent over and kissed Phillip so lightly that her lips just brushed his cheek. Then she fled upstairs and flung herself across the bed. "Oh, God," she prayed aloud, "don't let him die—don't let him die!"

She wanted to cry, but no tears came. She could only repeat, over and over again, like a liturgical chant except for the passion in each repetition, "Oh, God, don't let him die—don't let him die!"

CHAPTER 17

A SOUND BROKE IN UPON HER DULLED CONSCIOUSNESS, A SOUND faint and far away at first, but impinging swiftly and irresistibly upon the ear because of its alien quality. It was a sound Norah had heard many times before, nearly always with fear, but in this new environment it seemed strange, and beautiful as a great symphony. She leapt from the bed and rushed downstairs to the kitchen.

"The plane!" she cried joyously. "The plane! It's coming. It's here!"

They ran outside, all except Mrs. McKinley. The plane was already circling the house, flying very low so that they could see clearly the big red crosses on its wings.

"They didn't lose much time," Gail said. "Good old Weary!" She was standing at Brian's side, clinging to his arm. She looked almost like a small girl, except for her height. It was absurd but true, Gail looked like a happy, excited, small girl.

The plane circled again and came down in a long glide. When the skis touched the snow Norah held her breath, for there might be obstacles hidden beneath drifts, capable of wrecking the plane if the skis sank in too deep. But nothing happened. The plane slid to a stop, the snow-spray settling behind the skis as quietly as a bird skimming to rest on a calm reach of water.

The plane had stopped less than a hundred yards from the house. Now figures were coming from the plane across the snow, and Brian advanced to meet them. Norah lingered a moment, then hurried back inside. Her spirit was exalted. God had heard her prayer! Like Weary's arrival earlier in the day, when hope was all but vanished, the coming of the plane was a miracle, another manifestation of good

fighting back against the evil which threatened Phillip and herself. But the earth was cheated of its prey. Phillip, her son, was saved. He would live to grow into splendid, straight-limbed manhood, live to see Armstrong House rise on the great plain, live to succeed his father and in time pass on the inheritance to his own sons.

Phillip would live, but he was still far away from her. He lay as before, semi-recumbent against the pile of pillows at his back, his white face shadowed now with a faint bluish tinge. She called his name gently but he did not stir. His breathing was unexpectedly stertorous.

"Phillip," Norah said again. "Phillip."

He opened his eyes. "Hi, Mummy."

"Phillip, you're going for a ride—in a real airplane."

Something seemed to flicker in his eyes, a light dim and faint. He had heard, he had understood.

"You come, too, Mummy," he said.

She rested her hand lightly for a moment on his forehead. "I'll come too, Phillip."

There were others in the living-room now. A girl, tall, fair-haired, wearing a fur coat over her white uniform, a young man in a dark suit bending over Phillip. He had a syringe in his hand and Phillip cried out faintly when the needle punctured his arm. Norah guessed that the young man was an interne from the hospital, in charge during the flight. The pilot of the plane stood in the background, talking to Gail and Brian.

"No trouble at all," he was saying briskly. "Ceiling's a bit low; visibility O.K. We'll get back all right."

They had brought a stretcher into the living-room. Norah almost laughed when she saw it, for it was ridiculously large for Phillip.

"Why can't I carry him in my arms?" she asked the interne.

He shook his head decisively. "This way he'll be disturbed hardly at all."

He and the nurse were bundling Phillip up. Now he was on the stretcher, propped higher even than before, and it had been done so easily that it seemed to Norah he hadn't been moved at all. Hos-

pital people were marvellous, really. They knew so many tricks about making you comfortable without fuss.

Suddenly she remembered that she would need some things for a stay in town and dashed upstairs in utter panic. But Gail called after her, "I packed a bag for you, Norah, enough things to last you a week, I think. It's down here."

That was like Gail. She always kept her head. Except, perhaps, when Brian Malory was concerned. Norah came downstairs quickly, put on her coat and tied a woollen scarf around her head.

"We'll look after things here," Gail said. "Don't worry, Norah."

They were carrying Phillip out. The interne and the nurse both looked serious, intent. They moved quickly as if there was no time to be lost. "The snow is coming soon," the pilot said by way of explanation. "Are you ready, Mrs. Armstrong?" The interne looked at her and did not smile. He was ridiculously young to have charge of a case, even for half an hour. Hardly more than a boy, very tall, very handsome. She wondered if the fair-haired nurse were in love with him. It seemed likely, the way she looked at him once or twice. They were a fine-looking pair.

Just now the nurse was detached, impersonal. She was on a 'case', her humanity, her emotions, carefully concealed beneath the conventional veneer of her profession. She was competent and very self-assured. Probably she's getting as big a thrill out of this as a twelve-year-old, Norah thought, but she won't let on. "We'll have your boy in hospital in half an hour," she told Norah. "An ambulance is waiting at the air-port."

It seemed ridiculous that there should be all this fuss because Phillip had a little cold. Then she thought, appalled, my mind's wandering, Phillip has pneumonia, Phillip is a very sick little boy. So Dr. Harrington had said bluntly, so the young interne had said, though not in words. Norah had seen it in his face when he had come into the room and stood at the side of the cot. He had looked faintly shocked. But she knew with unshakeable assurance that there was nothing to be afraid of now. Phillip would be all right.

Sitting in the plane, looking at the great whiteness below, broken here and there by the little clusters of farm buildings hardly dis-

tinguishable because of their snow-covered roofs from the fields in which they stood, she thought to herself, tonight maybe I'll send another wire to Jim: "Phillip much better. No hurry. Love, Norah." She liked to think of sending the telegram, of the way the words would look written in pencil on a sheet of yellow paper, of the way the operator would look at her when he took the sheet of paper from her, smiling, sharing her relief and her happiness. But maybe he wouldn't smile. A telegraph operator had to be pretty impersonal on the surface, like a nurse or a doctor. For like them he was preoccupied with life and death. True, he assumed no responsibility for either, but he was the messenger of both, a man to be loved and feared.

She had never ridden in a plane before. Somewhere inside her was a deep-rooted distrust of airplanes. Once, when she had been a very small girl indeed, her father had taken her to a fair somewhere in the country—she couldn't remember even the name of the place. There had been horse-races, of course, that was why her father had taken her. He had won a little money that day, and by evening was very drunk. There was a tent on the grounds in which monsters were exhibited: a fat lady, a tattooed man, a three-legged giant, a two-headed calf. Norah hadn't wanted to go inside at all but some attraction stronger than her will seemed to draw her. But she had run out almost at once, crying, and for the rest of the day stayed as far away from the tent as she could. There had been an airplane at the fair, taking passengers up at ten shillings a head. In the middle of the afternoon it had suddenly gone into a spin and plunged two thousand feet to earth. Norah hadn't seen it fall, she was looking somewhere else at the time and was glad later, but she had heard the crash, had seen smoke and flames leaping from the wreckage. "'Tis a sad thing, Norah," her father had said, standing very straight and enunciating with great clearness, "a sad thing to be roasted on earth as well as in hell. Those poor devils have a right to question the beneficence of the Creator."

Norah had never liked planes after that day. And when the war came she associated them more strongly than ever with destruction and death. She had vowed that she would never ride in one.

It had not occurred to her that the time would come when she would have no choice.

But now the airplane seemed an enchanted thing. Norah felt no fear at all, not so much as a tremor. For the plane was carrying Phillip to safety. It had come in answer to her prayers; it was the visible embodiment of those forces which had first manifested themselves in Weary's opportune arrival, when hope was all but gone. If there was a deliberate ordered chain of events designed to achieve the end of man's destruction, it was logical to suppose the existence of a chain designed for his salvation. No matter what anyone said, Norah knew positively now that Phillip was going to get better. For if he died the new chain would be broken, it would have existed to no purpose at all. The power of good, of God—whatever you liked to call it—did not exist to expend itself in futility.

And, besides, Phillip could not die for the simple reason that existence without him would not be possible. Norah could not go on if Phillip were to leave her now. Not even for Jim's sake. It was strange, she thought, that a child three years of age who had no thoughts, no desires, no personality not involved in the satisfaction of his various appetites, could come to mean as much to you as a man full-grown, even a man you had married, a man you loved. More, if you were really honest about it. Yet not so strange either. For the relationship between a mother and her child was like no other relationship. The child was literally a part of the mother. Phillip was a part of her, in a way no other person could ever be. The love of a mother for her child, a child for his mother, had nothing to do with reason or personality or good or evil. Phillip was a part of her, nurtured in her womb, born of her body. The relationship was as simple, as logical as that.

But Phillip was not going to die. Almost Norah laughed at the great film of grey spread over the heavens, a film from which snowflakes were beginning to drift languidly towards the earth. The storm had done its worst, and she had defeated it. What her losses were she had not attempted to count. But she had won her battle, and there were no wounds that would not heal.

No wounds that would not heal! For she feared no one and nothing

any longer. She had faced the worst that the earth could do to her, and now was beyond its reach. Nor steel, nor poison, malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing can touch me further, she said to herself, irrelevantly she knew, but smiling almost in triumph. Jim would be proud—proud and glad. For now he could believe in her. What had happened between herself and Brian had no reality. Already it had ceased to have meaning. It was good that Brian and Gail were going away, although they would miss Brian. But Brian and Gail were unsettling people. With their going would come tranquillity.

The plane was flying very low, barely skimming the fields, it seemed. The snow was coming down faster now, and the sun had altogether disappeared. But the storm was gathering too late, only, it might delay Jim. Norah wanted to see Jim so much, wanted him for his own sake and not for any help he could give her. She did not need help now. But she wanted to feel his arms about her, to hear his "Hello, Norah, how are things?" She hoped that when he came she wouldn't break down. The strain of the past few days had been very great.

She looked back over her shoulder and smiled at the nurse. The nurse smiled back, uncertainly it seemed. The young interne was kneeling by the cot in which Phillip lay. From where she sat Norah could just see the top of Phillip's curly head. When they reached the airport they would simply take the cot from the plane to the ambulance without disturbing Phillip at all. Norah wondered idly where she would stay in town; perhaps the interne or the nurse would be able to recommend a good hotel. She would like a bath, and a long deep sleep. The relief of being able to shed the burden of responsibility was exquisite. She knew now how the ancient mariner had felt when the albatross slipped from his neck—how did the lines go?—*the selfsame moment I could pray, and from my neck so free, the albatross fell off and sank like lead into the sea.* Well, she had prayed too and her prayers had been answered. Phillip was going to get well.

She could see the town now, the airport just beyond. She turned to look at Phillip, wondering how much he understood of what was going on. Did he know that he had been up in an airplane like

Daddy used to fly? It didn't matter really. She would tell him about the flight afterwards, and it would be just as real as if he had remembered it himself.

The plane had landed now, had come to a stop. Norah felt the nurse's hand on her arm and smiled.

"It didn't take us very long," she said.

"The nurse did not smile back. "Mrs. Armstrong," she began. Quite suddenly she stopped and turned away her head.

Norah went back to where Phillip was lying. She stood by the cot and looked down into the still white face of her son who was dead. No tears came to her eyes. She did not want to cry. Tears were for children, tears were absurd. Poetry was absurd but poetry was running through her head, *art and eloquence and all the shows o' the world are frail and vain to weep a loss that turns their light to shade*. Vain to weep the golden lads who must, as chimney sweepers, come to dust, but not yet oh Christ not yet, he's only three, he's never lived. Now he was dead. Phillip her son was dead.

She turned to the interne, standing white-faced and tragic at her shoulder. "It's not your fault," she said. "It's not anybody's fault." And she tried to smile.

A scream broke upon her ears, a scream shrill and agonized. She did not know, falling forward into darkness, that it came from her own lips. But falling she thought, I'm glad he died before the plane landed, he won't have so far to go.

Then thought and feeling were alike extinguished in the great darkness which enfolded her, a darkness like night-time with no moon or stars, like death lapping gently her son.

CHAPTER 18

SHE COULD TALK TO JIM NOW. SHE WANTED TO TALK TO HIM ever since he had come home and there had been no time, and no privacy. Now everyone was gone and they were alone. In the past two days, since Jim had come back, things had become clear to her. Phillip was dead, and it was her fault. Things were as simple as that. She had sinned and God had punished her by taking away her child. Now God would let her alone. But she wouldn't let herself alone. She would tell Jim. He had a right to know that he was married to a harlot. She did not think about afterwards. But there was a compulsion in her that bade her speak, bade her complete the degradation of spirit which had begun with Phillip's death. And there would be a kind of comfort in speaking, the comfort which the confessional bestows formally on the penitent, the masochistic pleasure dwelling in the spectacle of the sin within one laid naked for another to behold.

They were in the kitchen sitting across from one another at the table. It was better in the kitchen, for the living-room reminded you too much of Phillip. Someone—Gail Anderson, Norah suspected—had gathered up all his toys and put them in a box in the corner of his room upstairs; but whenever she went into the living-room she saw him there in his cot, white-faced and quiet, heard his stertorous breathing. He would be breathing easier now. Norah hadn't gone to the graveside but she knew that the earth would rest lightly on Phillip because it wouldn't want to hurt him, he was such a little child. *Pray be silent and not stir the easy earth that covers her.* But Phillip wasn't a little girl, he was a little boy. No matter, the earth would rest lightly on him. But the earth was cruel, the earth was hungry. The earth had claimed him. Norah put her hands to her face. No, no, nothing could wish harm to Phillip!

No one could wish him alone and in darkness, for he had always been a little bit afraid of the dark. *Light of the World—remember that small fear, and when nor sun nor stars do shine—draw near.* Poetry again—all human experience in poetry.

But she must tell Jim. She must tell him so that he would understand what she was going to do afterwards. He would understand, of course. Everything was so clear. And that was strange after the confusion, the muddle-headedness of the days past—the days, the weeks, the years. For the first time in her life, almost, Norah saw her way clearly. She knew positively what she must do. No doubts, no equivocations any more. And no choice.

She lifted her head and looked incuriously at the two big parcels lying in the corner of the kitchen. Jim had brought them home with him, they had lain unopened for two days. Jim had forgotten about them and Norah did not care. She did not care about anything now except to tell what happened.

"Jim," she said, "I want to talk to you." Her voice was clear, composed. Why not? She spoke with assurance. She knew what she wanted to say, why she was saying it.

Jim looked at her rather strangely, she thought. His face was white, thin,—almost like Phillip's face just before he died—his eyes shifting and restless. Poor Jim, he had had a hard time; first his father, then Phillip.

"Are you sure?" he said.

"Sure?" she echoed in surprise. "Of course I'm sure, Jim."

He nodded his head uncertainly, but did not say anything more. All the time Norah was talking he sat with his eyes fixed on the floor. Only his fingers moving restlessly on the table-top betrayed the disturbance within him.

Norah told him all that had passed between herself and Brian. She told him of the first kiss in the river valley, of what had passed between them at the dance, of putting on the red dress and what happened after Brian came. She spoke unhurriedly in a low voice, almost without expression. The words did not seem to be coming from her own lips at all, but from somewhere outside herself, her lips moving in unison with the sounds.

"So you see, Jim," she said at last, "what happened was my fault. Entirely my fault."

She had to make him see that, had to convince him that she alone was to blame. Jim was soft, he would try to find excuses for her. But she would not tolerate excuses, she would destroy all grounds for their existence. For Jim must understand what she was going to do, understand and approve.

She finished speaking. Jim did not say anything for a long time. He got up suddenly, went to the corner where the parcels lay and picked up the one nearest him.

"I brought you a fur coat," he blurted out.

He set the parcel on the table and fumbled with the knots in the string. He could not untie them so he took a knife from the table drawer and cut the string. He took the coat from the box in which it lay and shook it out.

"I hope you'll like it," he said anxiously. "It's the right size."

Norah stared at him dumbly. The coat was beautiful, she saw, but it did not matter. Couldn't Jim understand what she had been telling him? That his wife was an adulteress, that she had killed their child. Or didn't he care? Dear God, didn't he care at all?

He dropped the coat on the table and came around to her side. He put his arm around her shoulders and she stiffened against his caress.

"You were afraid, Norah," he said in her ear. "Weren't you?"

"No," she lied defiantly, "I wasn't afraid."

His smile was disquieting, he didn't believe her. Then suddenly, inexplicably, he was holding her tight in his arms and she was crying wildly. "Oh God, Jim—I was afraid!"

He soothed her as if she were a child. "There, there, Norah," he said. "It's all right now. You weren't to blame. I should never have left you."

She started away at that. "My fault, Jim," she cried passionately. "My fault. I was a coward!"

But he shook his head. There was a strange, almost furtive look in his eyes that Norah had never seen there before.

"I deserved all this," he said.

He caught her by the shoulders, held her so tightly that she cried out in pain. "Norah, don't you see? It doesn't matter—whatever happened . . ."

Norah was silent. Jim's voice died away, his hold relaxed. "Forgive me, Norah," he said dully. "I've been pretty stupid about things."

She did not understand, and looked at him wonderingly. "Oh, Jim," she said, "why should I forgive you?"

"I've been a fool," he said. "It's all my fault."

Her head was going round again. There were strange noises in it and she couldn't think as clearly as she had a minute ago. But there was something she had to do. She clung to that. Nothing can shake my purpose, she thought; but no words came and, laughing, she stood up very straight. Jim stared at her, and his face seemed whiter even than before.

"What's in the other parcel, Jim?" she said. "A diamond necklace to go with the fur coat?"

"It's a dump-truck," he said. "For Phillip."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" Norah said. "He's been wanting one ever so much."

Again she felt Jim's hands on her shoulders. This time his grip was gentle, almost caressing. "Norah," he said, "I'm going out for a little while. Maybe an hour or two. Won't you please lie down and have a little rest?"

"But Jim, where are you going?"

"Over to Judd's place," he said. "Some things I have to see about."

He was clumsily lying to her. But she must not let him see that she knew. His going would make things so much easier, now that she could not depend on his co-operation.

"Of course, Jim," she said. "I'll go upstairs and lie down right now. I'm awfully tired."

"I hate leaving you even for a little while," he said. "I wish we had asked Gail to stay."

"It's better this way," Norah said. "I'm tired of a houseful of people."

She knew that he would not leave until she had gone upstairs. "I'm so tired," she yawned. "I'll sleep like a log!"

She went upstairs, filled with a great content. Things were working out well. It would be easy now to fulfil her plans. No, not her plan, someone else's plan. It would be easy to do what she had to do, easy to follow to the end of the course which had been decreed for her. She heard the kitchen door slam below, then all was quiet. A few minutes later she heard the jingle of sleigh-bells. Jim was driving the team Judd McKinley had lent him. She could see him from the bedroom window, urging the team to a fast trot over the rough trail. The road was still bad all the way to the McKinley place, and though Jim drove like one scourged by all the furies of hell it would be three hours or more before he could be back. She was glad that the telephone line had not been repaired yet; if it had been, Jim would simply have phoned, and stayed to watch her. She understood the terror that was in him and pitied him for it. Poor Jim! He thought she was going mad. He would bring Mrs. McKinley to stay with her while he hurried to town for the doctor. Or perhaps he would send Judd. All the time he was away his mind would be a sustained agony of apprehension. Norah was really sorry for him, she hated to cause him pain.

But she wasn't mad. Mad once, perhaps, but not now. She saw her course clearly. Whatever she had touched had died. Phillip had died to whom she had given birth. Jim's love had died. Now she must die too. It filled her with a sense of exaltation to know that she was not afraid. Already she had died a thousand false deaths, so that the reality could not shake her. But first she must open Phillip's present.

The dump-truck was a beauty! Bright red and yellow, with a powerful wind-up motor, a lever at the side for raising and lowering the box, licence plates front and rear. There was a card attached: "To Phillip from Daddy, for being a good boy". Phillip would be delighted; in imagination Norah could hear his shrill ecstatic squeals. She could not wait till Jim was there too, she picked up the truck and almost ran to Phillip's room.

She stopped in the doorway, horrified. Phillip was not in his room nor anywhere in the house. Phillip was dead—*cold in the earth*

and the deep snow piled above thee, far, far removed, cold in the dreary grave. So the poet sang heart-breakingly a hundred years ago of one who was dead, of one who had never lived except in her imagination. What would she have sung of flesh and blood she had loved and lost? She would have been mute—mute with the sorrow that cuts off utterance at its source.

Norah set the dump-truck on the table in Phillip's room. It was odd how different the room seemed now. Not because Phillip wasn't there, but it had assumed an impersonality that was strange and disturbing. Someone had tidied the room and put away all his toys. She found the toys in a box in the corner, and then she remembered that Gail Anderson had been in the room. Gail was trying to be kind. But it didn't hurt to look at the toys: the wind-up train, the innumerable little plastic cars, red and white and yellow and green and blue cars, the blocks, the picture-books. Norah took some of the toys out and set them on the table and she spread the cars of the wind-up train higgledy-piggledy over the floor. That way the room looked natural, that way it looked as if Phillip had been here five minutes ago.

It was growing dark in the room. She must hurry because if she fell to dreaming Jim might come back before she had completed her plan—God's plan—and failure would be flying in the face of God. She took a last look around the room and closed the door without making any noise. She went downstairs very softly so that she would not waken Phillip. Then she laughed out loud at the absurdity of what she was doing. Phillip was dead.

For a little while she lingered in the living-room. The house would be cold and lonely for Jim to come back to. Not that there could be any turning back now, but she hated to think of Jim left alone. She recalled, wistfully and almost with tears, the days when he had loved her, before she had betrayed him. They had been happy sometimes, and perhaps, she thought fleetingly, they might be happy again. Happy in each other's arms, happy in the children she would bear him. But passionately she rejected the dream. Jim would never take her in his arms again, never make love to her, for soon she would be dead. There was no other way. She must banish the dreams she had lived by for always they played her false.

The earth had defeated her, but not at the last. She would claim her part of it, with Phillip. That would be her triumph.

Still she lingered in the living-room. The darkness intensified until she could see hardly the width of the room, except for the windows, grey oblongs in the shadow. Unthinkingly she reached out and switched on the radio. Almost at once the room was filled with sound. Somewhere three thousand miles away a great symphony orchestra was playing. A voice reached out across the void and seemed to hang suspended in the air, a rich passionate contralto singing the most heart-beaking of all laments, the Farewell from Mahler's *Song of the Earth*—*still ist mein herz und harret seiner Stunde! . . . Ewig . . . Ewig . . .*

The words died away, the music died too. Norah switched off the radio before the voice of the announcer had time to jar the silence. The significance of the song, the last she would ever hear, was unmistakable. Now was the appropriate hour of her going, the hour fixed from the beginning of time when the immutable forces of the universe had patterned the destinies of men.

There was light still in the kitchen, dim, uncertain, but enough so that she could catch the sheen of the new fur coat where it lay on the table. She took it up almost furtively and slipped it on. The fur was soft to her cheek, and when she drew the hood up over her head she exclaimed with delight. Warm, warm—and what a wonderful gift! *Fear no more the heat o' the sun nor the winter's rages.* Not the winter's rages in a coat like this! A shroud such as no woman had ever worn before to do honour to her taking-off.

She put on her high Russian boots—silly, but the coat seemed incomplete without them—and went outside into the dim half-light. It must be cold, she thought, for her breath curled away like frosted smoke, but she did not feel it. Not even though the wind was blowing hard and flakes of snow were slanting down from a liver-coloured sky. There was a storm coming on, but she was beyond its reach. She felt an exaltation of spirit such as she had never known before. She had not faltered, had not turned back. She was fulfilling her destiny of her own free will. That was the thing—of her own free will.

She went very slowly down the driveway for the sleigh tracks were

deep and narrow and hard to walk in. By the time she reached the road darkness had fallen. Looking back she could see the dim outline of the house, but even as she looked the outline wavered and disappeared, cut off from sight by darkness and falling snow. Poor Jim, she thought, he'll have a hard time getting home.

There was no objective she wanted to reach. Without conscious thought she turned up the road in the direction she had taken the day of her walk in the rain. There were sleigh tracks along the road here too, but the walking was still difficult. Soon she was tired and sat down in the snow to rest. But almost at once she started up, crying out aloud at her folly. This was the way Jim would come home. How absurd if he should find her here, sitting in a snow-bank! She turned off the road at once and struck out across what in summer-time was a grain-field.

The walking, if you could call it walking, was terribly painful at first. The snow was hard-packed by the wind but not hard enough to sustain her weight. Norah broke through at every step, and the edges of the snow crust cut her legs above the boots up to the thigh. The cold was penetrating. Not even the fur coat could protect her from its barbs. The wind buffeted her; several times she fell, and each time it was more difficult to get to her feet again. But presently she found that she was moving in a direction which held the wind at her back. That way it was much easier to flounder along through the snow.

Strange that the wind should blow so cold. She had never felt it so intense before. It came from the sea, she knew, but here in the glens it had never been so cold before. And the walking was dreadful. She should never have come out. Uncle James would be very angry with her when he knew. But there was something she had to do, although she could not remember clearly what it was. Something so urgent that rain or hail or snow could not hold her back. She hadn't told Uncle James, she hadn't told anybody. It was a secret, but she couldn't remember what it was. A real secret, she thought, laughing deep inside. A secret even from herself.

She fell forward and lay in the snow a long time. The snow was cold on her cheeks and forehead, for the hood of the new fur coat had fallen back, leaving her face quite unprotected. Lying there she

laughed again to herself, this time at her foolishness. For a little while she had thought herself back at Innishcoolín, wandering through the glens seeking fulfilment of some crazy mission. And all the time she was out on the prairies in a snow-storm looking for Phillip, her son. Remembering Phillip she started up wildly and struggled forward with desperate energy. "Phillip! Phillip!" she cried in anguish. But the wind snatched her words almost before they had time to pass her lips. Phillip would never hear them. Phillip was lost. Phillip was dead.

That was it. Phillip was dead. And I'm dead too, Norah thought, and sank down where she stood. This was what she had come for. There was no use struggling any longer, no use attempting to defeat the purpose for which she had come. Deliberately she tore open her coat and turned her face to the wind.

A sleep and a forgetting, they said. But they were wrong—it wasn't like that at all. The shafts of cold thrust themselves into her flesh, and every thrust was an agonizing wound. Crying now, she pulled the coat close around her and turned her back on the wind. They were wrong about the sleep, the painless sleep that came upon people dying of cold in a snow-storm. The old man and old woman must have suffered beyond human comprehension.

But you could endure pain if you were sure about the forgetting. Men were wrong about the one—suppose they were wrong about the other. Suppose that death brought no forgetting but only remembrance more intense than anything you experienced in life. That would be the hell people once talked about. But there was no use wondering now. Not even if she wanted to could she turn back. She was following the path of her destiny of her own free will.

And now, as so often in the past, the vision broke in upon the prosaic logic of her thought, the vision unprompted, which had no relation to anything having previous existence in her consciousness. In the moment of vision she saw with awful clarity the truth thus far concealed from her. In following the path of her destiny she was doing so *not* of her own free will. This act of hers was the consummation, not of something she had willed, but of the earth's purposes, the earth which had sought to destroy her long ago, from

the time she first came to the prairies. Now the hour of fulfilment was at hand. And her will had nothing to do with it.

It was useless to fight. The ultimate tragedy of her existence was that she should see the truth when it was too late; see that ahead of her there might have lain years in which she could have defied the forces which sought to destroy her and have earned, if not victory, at least honourable peace. But no—she was wrong about one thing—it wasn't useless to fight. By fighting she could escape that final degradation of the human spirit to which less than an hour ago she had committed herself—acquiescence in the plan of destiny. The words of the long-nosed Cyrano, which she had cherished at school long ago, crossed her mind: *But one does not fight because there is hope of winning! No! No! . . . it is much better to fight when it is no use!*" Norah got to her feet slowly and stumbled on.

But the stones were rough and sharp under her feet; the marsh reeds tore at her legs and time after time threw her to the ground. Somewhere ahead of her she knew that Phillip was hiding. He was lost and did not know it; and she called and called till her throat was sore and rasping. And then she knew that he was not there at all, knew that there were no stones under her feet, only snow; and no marsh reeds plucking at her legs, only snow; and that soon she must stop fighting and lie down to die. But the snow would cover her gently enough, white snow-flakes sepulchring an adulteress.

She felt without surprise her legs give way under her. This time she did not try to get up, but lay quite still. Now, she thought, sleep will come. She felt no pain anywhere, but a great numbness everywhere, except in her brain. If only she could stop the wheels in her head and have no thoughts at all! Death would come easily then. "Come, sweet death," she sang ever so softly, "Come, sweet death." But she didn't really want to die. The voices crying all around her were shrill with triumph, the voices of devils exulting over another lost soul. And Jim would be sorry. Whatever she had done to him he would grieve for her, and it hurt her to think that she should deliberately make him sad. And Phillip would miss her terribly. He would shout, "Hi, Mummy!" over and over again and she wouldn't be there to answer. Death would be easy if only you could forget.

It was quiet now, and the fields were silver in the moonlight. The ghost of a wind stirred the trees and from somewhere far off Norah could hear the call of a night-bird to his mate. But she wasn't happy, walking quiet-footed over the dew-wet grass, wondering if she would see the fairies dance in the fairy ring at the bottom of the meadow, where, said Uncle James, they danced always on Mid-summer's Eve. She wasn't happy because tomorrow she must go back to the old bleak house where her father and Aunt Lucy moved, ghosts among ghosts, without life, without hope,—to the old bleak house which was full of the chill of age and decay, the cold which the fire smouldering in the hearth might diminish a little but never drive away.

The house was colder than it had ever been. Norah could feel the chill reaching her heart, even though she had barely crossed the threshold. Aunt Lucy waited in the hallway, black as always, black as the shadows behind her. There was a candle in her hand, but the flame burned reluctantly, a tiny pin-point of light which shed no radiance anywhere. Yet Norah could see clearly, although there was no light falling on him, her father in the background, his bloodless face stark white, his hands held out to her as if in welcome.

"We have been waiting," her father said.

"We have been waiting," Aunt Lucy said.

They moved towards her slowly, like automatons propelled by a force not controlled by their conscious wills. Norah turned and ran screaming down the long empty street. There was a canal at the end of the street but she did not think of it until too late—until her feet trod only space and she fell down into a great emptiness. The waters closed over her head, they were cold, bitterly cold, but they did not choke her. She floated in the water for a while, without effort. She felt nothing, saw nothing. She knew that she was dead. Dead and at peace. Only, her mind still lived.

And she was not at peace. For Phillip was under the water with her. He was drowning, and she could not find him. Not even though she heard his voice calling, calling—to die away at last into that silence which nothing would ever break again.

CHAPTER 19

THE ROOM WAS VERY QUIET. THE SUNLIGHT COMING THROUGH the window past white curtains did not hurt one's eyes, for the soft green of the walls absorbed its harshness. There was a picture on the wall at the foot of the bed, a landscape of hills and trees, with water in the foreground, painted in delicate pastels. Not a great work of art, no matter whose signature might be in the corner, but restful and unobtrusive. Norah had never seen a picture in a hospital room before, and she was unaccountably pleased. Everything about the room was restful—the quietness, the colour scheme, the high white ceiling which suggested uncluttered spaciousness; and Norah was content to lie back on her pillow, lapped in the tranquillity which her surroundings diffused.

Glad to be at peace, if only for a little while, for she had been troubled in mind many days. Time past was nightmare-haunted, and she was not yet able to separate altogether nightmare from reality. Some things she remembered clearly. But mingled with the realities which she could grasp with certitude were confused half-recollections: of a great storm and herself floundering naked and lost through the snow; an airplane flying low under grey skies bearing herself and Phillip to some dimly perceived but inexorably destined end; a dump-truck painted bright red and yellow; Gail Anderson's red mouth saying, "Brian has come back to me"; a voice haunting the twilight, raised in passionate full-throated farewell—"Still ist mein herz." There were some things, too, which she was sure were dreams: strange bestial shadows which had surrounded her, fighting for possession of her body, shadows which came and went inexplicably in darkness as black as themselves but in which they had visible formless being. She had cried out many times; she had

called for help, but no one had come. She knew now that she must have been raving in delirium.

There had been dreams kindlier than these. Many times she had walked through the glens of Innishcoolín, but always alone, always a little fearful of things that might happen to her, always searching for something she could not name. But the glens were lovely in spring-time, the turf green and resilient under foot, wreaths of mist clinging to the hill-tops, the scent of hawthorn sweet in her nostrils. Once, all by herself, she had taken a boat and rowed through the bed of rushes near the shore and across the still waters of the loch to the little island she had visited once before with the old man who made poteen. But where she had looked for the ruined chapel she found only grave-stones; and a great storm had come up, blotting out the twilight, and strange shadowy shapes had appeared, reaching for her with octopus-like tentacles which had power to encircle but not to hold. And once she had lain down in the shelter of the yellow gorse on the slope of Cave Hill, and Jim had found her and lain down beside her. But when she had turned herself to him, crying out for his love, he had gone away. She had wept then, broken-heartedly, but he had not come back.

All these fancies, good and bad, were dreams and meaningless. What she knew to be dreams had no power to move her beyond the fleeting moment of their existence. She recalled them objectively, without emotion. But the things which were real remained and claimed possession of her mind. Thinking back, she could separate them now, all of them she believed. She *had* floundered through a great storm, not naked, but beaten by the wind, half-frozen and lost; she had held in her hands a dump-truck painted bright red and yellow; she had soared through the skies in an airplane with Phillip who was dying, only she hadn't known he was dying at the time.

She cried a little, thinking of Phillip, thinking of the red and yellow dump-truck and how he would have exclaimed had he seen it. But Phillip was dead, his grave already deep under drifted snow. The snow would melt, the grass grow green on his grave year after year; but Phillip would not come back. Thinking of him, she had

for the moment no sense of guilt. Not even when she remembered how he had slipped outside when she wasn't looking. So many things had happened over which she had no control. She had been defeated by the forces which defeat nearly all men, forces inherent in the earth itself, and which had nothing to do with good or evil as manifested in the petty actions of mankind.

Norah no longer believed—as she once had, and believing, had made Jim her confessor—that Phillip had died for her sins. Phillip himself was innocent. Jim was innocent. And they were the ones who had suffered most. No, not Phillip perhaps. He had escaped from life before it had had time to mark him. There was comfort in that reflection even though she knew, somewhere in the recesses of her mind, that it was sophistry. But Jim had already endured, and must continue to endure, unimaginable torment. God's justice did not extend punishment to the innocent, not if God's justice had any meaning. What had happened was not of God. The hungry earth had claimed Phillip, the earth which was the enemy of mankind.

But would Jim understand? Had he ever sensed the existence of that malignant power which here, in the middle of this lonely desolation, found conditions most favourable to its nurturing? She did not think so. Jim did not often look beyond events themselves for a meaning. From his point of view what had happened must make a logical sequence. Norah, his wife, had been unfaithful to him. Phillip, their son, in her sole keeping, had died. He would be driven to see a connection between these two things. He would ignore the complicating factors of his own quite innocent suffering and Phillip's innocent death, or else dismiss them with a truism, that the innocent always suffer with the guilty. Not that he wouldn't forgive Norah. He had forgiven her already. He blamed himself for having left her. And he knew that she had not really been unfaithful. His powers of imagination were sufficient to comprehend the situation which had driven her into Brian Malory's arms.

But he would see only that she was timid and that he had withdrawn his protection at a crucial time. Always now he would be her protector, forever at her side to guard her against the dangers which menaced her because she was timid and weak. The

years ahead could bring no peace because they could bring no understanding. There would always be a barrier between herself and Jim.

In some ways it would be a good life which they would lead together. There would be more children; and the evil which had once threatened them, having failed to achieve their total annihilation, would perhaps threaten them no more. They would grow rich and build Armstrong House; the neighbours would speak of them as a model family. But there would never be complete confidence between herself and Jim. Jim would doubt, would wonder, would feel at times a great unhappiness. He had endured enough already! Norah could not bear to think of Jim unhappy.

It was not that she wished for a grand ecstatic passion to be shared between them. She knew that Jim had never felt that kind of passion for her, that he was perhaps incapable by nature of feeling it for any woman. He himself was a man who inspired enduring affection, not consuming desire. Perhaps the kind of love you read about in books, the kind Gail Anderson felt for Brian Malory, could triumph over doubt; but that which existed between herself and Jim was a more fragile emotion. Norah looked into the future with fear.

Fear would be with her to the end. For more years almost than she could remember it had been her familiar. She must be resigned now to the fact that it was inextricably a part of her being.

Having admitted the truth Norah lay back on her pillow, resolved to think no more. Gail Anderson was right. Too much thinking makes you mad.

There was a nurse in the room, crisp and assured in her white uniform. Had she been there all the time? Norah wondered. The nurse smiled a bright impersonal smile.

"You're better, Mrs. Armstrong. Much better."

Norah smiled back but did not say anything, for the nurse had put a thermometer in her mouth. Now the nurse moved about the room with exaggerated briskness, smoothing sheets, arranging flowers on the small table beside the bed. All the time she hummed softly

to herself. Perhaps she was in love, perhaps she was thinking of her lover.

The doctor came soon afterwards. Norah had seen him before, but only dimly, at a time when she had been almost wholly occupied with the pain racking her body. He, too, was smiling.

"Out of the woods, Mrs. Armstrong," he said, showing strong white teeth. All Westerners had strong white teeth. Perhaps the alkali in the water acted as a preservative. The doctor held her wrist, perfunctorily she thought, and looked at his watch. He put away his watch, glanced at the chart at the foot of the bed, and nodded briskly.

"No fever," he said. "Everything fine, just fine."

He bustled out of the room almost at once. Norah looked at the nurse.

"Jim—my husband?" she said hesitantly.

"He'll be in to see you soon," the nurse said. "You've given him an anxious time of it, Mrs. Armstrong."

She went out, after admonishing Norah to rest, and closed the door behind her. But Norah had lost all desire to sleep. What was she to say to Jim when he came? How was she to smile at him and pretend that everything was well? He had been at her bedside many times these days past. Days, or weeks? She had lost all track of time. She had talked to him, but she couldn't remember what she had said. He had spoken reassuringly, had told her that she would be all right soon. She could remember no more than that.

When he came Norah did not say anything for a long time. He stood by the window, smiling at her in an almost bashful way, and she knew at once that he was embarrassed and ill at ease. Norah did not feel nervous any more. But she wished that she could find words to comfort Jim.

His appearance shocked her. He was thinner than she had ever seen him, his eyes seemed to have receded into his head, and he moved slowly, like an old man. Of a sudden he came over to the bed and dropped on his knees beside her. She rested her hand on his head, her hand which was so white against the blackness of his hair.

"Poor Jim," she said.

"Poor nothing," he whispered. "You're going to be all right."

"Have I been very sick?"

"Pretty sick, Norah. Off your head for a while, sort of. You gave us a bad scare. But we'll forget about that."

"Yes," Norah said. "We'll forget."

But they would not forget. It was not possible that they would forget. What she had done could not be undone, and Norah was filled with the anguish of remorse. Especially when she looked at Jim and thought of Phillip. Never again would she hear Phillip's shrill little voice; never again watch proudly his sturdy figure scuttling to meet Jim bringing the tractor from the field so that he might claim his ride; never again comfort him and wipe away his tears when he suffered some hurt, real or imaginary. All that she was feeling now, the heart-break, the agonizing sense of guilt from which only an hour ago she had thought herself free, would never go away. Jim must be suffering too. He should have hated her; but perhaps his sorrow was so great that there was no room in his heart for any other emotion.

She turned her head away so that he would not see her tears. But he knew that she was crying. Now it was his hand stroking gently her hair, his voice quiet in her ears.

"We still have each other, Norah. And there will be more children."

She did not want more children, she wanted Phillip who had gone away from her, Phillip who was dead. But she mustn't cry any more. Tears were for the sorrows that would heal. For Phillip *no tears nor sobs nor groans, the passionate tumult of a clinging hope but pale despair and cold tranquillity*. Poetry again, poetry that had no comfort in it. Only the truth.

But *she* had to go on. No matter what she had done she had to go on. Irrelevantly she thought of Gail and Brian. They were going on too, but unlike her living out their twisted destinies in defiance if need be of man and God. They were living in sin, so people would say. But the phrase was meaningless, how meaningless Norah had never known till now. For all men lived in sin, only there were

some sins you could name and some you couldn't. She could name her sin now. Not infidelity, though Brian Malory had been for a night her lover. Her real self had always been true to Jim. Her sin was fear. All her life she had lived in fear. She had been punished for her sin. But it wasn't the kind of sin you could escape from, no matter how hard you tried, through any act of expiation. Not even Phillip dead could save her from fear.

Jim had got up and was standing again by the window. A cloud must have crossed the sun; for the moment she could not see his face clearly. She leant back on the pillow and plucked idly at the coverlet with long nervous fingers that had no strength in them. "I wonder when they'll let me go home?" she said. She didn't want to go home because home had no meaning any longer. Phillip was dead; and between herself and Jim was the great barrier of doubt and misunderstanding, a barrier founded on things intangible, beyond reach of either sentiment or reason.

She could not see out of the window from where she was lying, but she knew that Jim was looking out upon a great waste of snow, thinking of Phillip, so quiet now and so alone. She could not bear to look at him any longer, for he must hate her as he had never hated anyone in his life before. Only, he *didn't* hate her. Jim still loved her. If he had hated her, things might be easier somehow. Comprehensible, anyway. She thought with a great longing of the moment when she had lain down quietly in the snow to die. Why had Jim come for her? Why couldn't he have let her die in peace? She would never have the courage to seek death again deliberately, and life was no longer tolerable, because it was an existence of negation.

Thinking so, Norah said, in a voice made wistful by regret, "Jim, how did you find me?"

He came back to her side and looked at her, smiling in an uncertain kind of way. "The horses shied at something lying beside the road. I got out and looked. It was you."

"I must have walked in a circle," Norah said. "Inadequate to the end!"

Jim pretended not to hear. "You got lonely, I guess," he said

jerkily. "Went for a walk—silly thing to do. Over-estimated your strength. You were lucky. But you don't remember."

"No," Norah lied. "I don't remember."

Jim came to see her every day after that. Always, Norah looked forward with nervous eagerness to his coming; but when he came she was embarrassed and unhappy. They were like actors in each other's presence, stumbling through their platitudinous lines. Each time, when Jim went away, Norah relaxed into the languor of utter exhaustion. Then, when she was rested, she went over and over again in her mind all that they had said to each other, and planned what she would say to Jim tomorrow. But when tomorrow came, all the fine phrases slipped away from her, or she could not find the courage to speak them.

Each day a little more of her strength came back. Soon she spent most of the afternoon sitting up; and one day a hairdresser from town came and set her hair. After the hairdresser had gone Norah put on a little make-up and studied herself in the mirror with a flicker of interest. "You're beautiful, Mrs. Armstrong," the nurse said sincerely; and the doctor who came in just then looked at her in a way he hadn't before, a way that made Norah turn her eyes from his face elsewhere.

When Jim came that afternoon his face lit up. "Norah," he said, "you—you look—the way you used to . . ."

Then the embarrassment and hesitation came back all at once. "A great day," he said. "Chinook blowing! There's water in the streets."

He stayed a long time. There was something he wanted to tell her, Norah knew, but he couldn't get the words out. He talked desultorily about nothing that mattered. Norah played up to him at first as best she could, but after a while her interest waned. She was tired, she wanted to rest.

"I think I'll go back to bed, Jim," she said at last. "I'm tired now."

Jim was standing by the window. He turned to her quickly; and she saw that his mind was made up. His eyes were eager, excited. Almost, for a moment, he looked like a small boy.

"Norah," he said, "I've got a surprise for you."

He came over beside her chair and put his hand on her shoulder. His fingers, strong and tense, gripped her hard. Norah tried to feign the interest she did not feel. She hardly felt anything at all except the great weariness which had settled upon her. She wanted Jim to go away, so that she might sleep. But she said, "What is it, Jim? Tell me quick."

"We're going to move."

For a minute Norah did not understand. And because she did not respond at once, the light died out of Jim's eyes.

"I thought you'd be pleased," he said.

"Move? But where?"

"The coast, Norah. Just as soon as I can sell the farm. There won't be any trouble about it. Judd McKinley says he'll take the south half—pay cash. And a fellow the other side of Twin Buttes is interested in the home place. We'll have to have a sale, of course, but you don't need to worry about that. Why, I shouldn't be surprised if you just step out of here on to the train . . ."

"What's the place like, where we'll be going?"

She had asked the same question years ago, in another life, when she and Jim had sat on the slopes of Cave Hill and he had told her about the West.

"Like home, Norah," Jim said. "Hills all around, mountains in the distance, clear water everywhere. The sea is only ten miles away."

His voice rose, strong and confident. "We'll grow fruit mostly—apples, plums, peaches. Maybe a few acres of grain. And you can see the town from the front verandah—only a mile or two down the valley."

Norah closed her eyes. It couldn't be true what Jim was saying. Not hills, real hills, and water that ran clear over rocky beds, and snow-capped mountains against the skyline, and friendly trees all around. There would be hedges too, though Jim hadn't said so, and the rain would fall like heavy mist, not in savage waves of violence; and the earth would be quiet sometimes, for the wind wouldn't blow every day. For the moment something like ecstasy took possession

of her; she strained upwards and threw her arms about Jim's neck. "Jim—Jim," she half-sobbed. "It sounds like heaven!"

The emotion died almost as soon as it was born. Her arms slid from about Jim's neck, and she sat quiet and still in her chair. Her hand stole out and sought his.

"But Jim," she said, almost matter-of-factly, "we can't go."

Astonishment and fear showed in his face. "But Norah, dearest, why not?"

Norah smiled at him without speaking. There was nothing more to say; she could not explain.

"Why not?" Jim repeated, gripping her hand so tightly that she almost cried out.

She shook her head, almost imperceptibly. You couldn't explain a feeling, not until you had uncovered its origins. She couldn't explain that her refusal was no *beau geste*, no hurling defiance in the teeth of fate, no rash assumption of the impossible so that she might justify herself in Jim's eyes. The time of these things was long past.

But she knew obscurely that whatever peace she was to find in life she must find it here. There was, after all, something worth living for—Jim's love. To lose his love, which had survived thus far in spite of all, would be the ultimate, the only defeat. She saw now with startling clarity the future as Jim had planned it—Jim, who breathed easily only under an immense vault of sky, hemmed in by the crowding hills; Jim, who loved the vast grey sweep of prairie better than anywhere else on earth, picking apples in an orchard. The unhappiest of men, he would subconsciously blame her for making him so. The things that had happened could be forgiven. They had been forgiven already—because they could be recognized and named. The sin into which he was unwittingly leading her had no name; but it was the most terrible of them all.

This much she knew—she must not go. And what filled her with a strange and awful sense of joy was the realization that her decision was not an act of renunciation. She did not want to go. She was ready to make terms with the earth itself. But she could not explain to Jim.

"Why not?" he repeated for the third time, in the fretful tones of a disappointed child.

But not altogether disappointed. Rather, in the tones of one who, hoping desperately, seeks, in the fear of disappointment, to hide his feelings behind a clumsy façade.

Norah looked up into his face. The answer was easy, after all.

"Because I love you," she said.